THE TRIUMPH OF ARGUMENT

GÁBOR FORRAI

Ferenc Altrichter:

Észérvek az európai filozófiai hagyományban

(Argumentation in the European

Philosophical Tradition)

Budapest, Atlantisz, 1993, 383 pp.

The philosopher Ferenc Altrichter's book contains ten studies published between 1969 and 1985. They seem, at first glance, to have very little in common. There is talk of metaphysics, epistemology, semantics, modal logic, philosophy of science and philosophy of mind. Diodoros Chronos and Buridan, as well as Descartes and Hempel figure among the thinkers whose works are examined. What gives the book its unity is a certain consistency of approach. The majority of the studies could be characterized as *historical analysis*, i.e., a look at the classical problems of philosophy in the light of contemporary logical analysis. "Historical" here does not mean showing how a question or argument recurs in a new form in the work of some modern philosopher. What Altrichter does is to use contemporary methods and categories to clarify and evaluate some of the classical arguments of Western philosophy. Experience shows that it is all too easy for an analytic philosopher to interpret the classics out of context and to foist modern ੋgories on the defenseless past. Altrichter is too good a historian, however, to fall into this trap, and has too thorough a knowledge of both the classics and the generations of commentators. The analyses he gives are as unfailingly sensitive to the historical context as to the philosophical problem itself.

Altrichter's approach is directly related to his views on the nature of philosophy. Though rather laconic on this score (pp. 6–7), he does mention three things. First: there are problems that are *sui generis* philosophical problems. Two: philosophical positions must be supported by arguments. Three: the philosopher must try to present his views in a way that is clear and comprehensible.

A reviewer cannot leave it at that, however. He must try for something more concrete than this, even at the risk of misinterpretation. We might start by

noting that in Altrichter's view, philosophy is a *science*, and not a world view. Philosophy is not meant to answer questions like "What is our place in the world?" or "What is it to be a human being (or a Central European, or an intellectual, etc.) in the last decades of the twentieth century?" In this book, the reader is unlikely to find even indirect answers to such questions.

Another feature of Altrichter's approach is that he prefers to focus on *particular problems* rather than on philosophical systems. It is philosophical problems that link philosophy in the past to philosophy in the present. *Problems, solutions,* and *arguments* supporting or refuting particular solutions—these are the categories in which Altrichter thinks about philosophy. Philosophical "systems" interest him only insofar as they shed light on a particular theory. The result of this problem-oriented approach is that no overall picture of Altrichter's philosophical position emerges from the volume (except for his position on what philosophy is). Not that Altrichter is eclectic or inconsistent. To be so, one needs to posit a system, an arbitrary system of incompatible elements. Altrichter, however, posits no system whatsoever. The problems he discusses have as little bearing on one another as the answers he comes up with.

The third characteristic of Altrichter's approach is its *rationalism*. By this I mean two things: he believes that there is such a thing as truth; and he believes in the power of reason to arrive at it. In philosophy as in mathematics, a statement will be true or false. The difference is that it is a rare philosophical problem that can be given an answer that is valid once and for all. But the truth of a philosophical statement is in the same class as the truth of a mathematical statement; it's just a little more difficult to establish. Altrichter is not a relativist. If I think something is true and you think it is false, one of us is mistaken, and reasoning is the only way to establish which one it is. Since argumentation is the only way to arrive at the truth, every philosopher worth his salt will argue for his position. For a philosopher is not an oracle; he cannot simply make pronouncements. Accordingly, Altrichter himself presents reasoned arguments for his position throughout, giving arguments detailed and lucid enough for anyone to follow. His presentation is so lucid that at times one can hardly believe that issues so complex can be made so comprehensible.

certainty through wholesale doubt. We cannot be said to possess absolute certainty with regard to any proposition which we can imagine as being false, or whose negation seems to us to be logically possible. We cannot say that we possess absolute certainty with regard to the statement "Mersenne is", for we can imagine that Mersenne is not. The situation is different in the first person singular. I cannot imagine that I am not. "I think that I am not" is inconsistent. *Sum* in itself is a contingent statement; my existence is no more necessary than Mersenne's. If, on the other hand, *sum* appears in a dependent clause after *cogito*, it becomes necessarily true. It is this relationship of necessity between the two terms that *ergo* expresses. And on this interpretation, it becomes quite clear why Descartes felt that this was the proposition with regard to which he possessed absolute certainty.

But why, we might ask, did Descartes choose to infer the absolute certainty of *sum* from *cogito*? Any number of propositional attitude verbs would have done for the purpose. For instance, "I am" follows from "I fear I am" as necessarily as from the *cogito* statement. The reason for Descartes's choice of verbs, Altrichter maintains, is to be sought in the relationship that "*Cogito, ergo sum*" bears to another, no less famous, Cartesian doctrine: "*Sum res cogitans*". His contemporaries were already puzzled as to what Descartes based this latter statement on. Spinoza held that the two doctrines were equivalent, and that in substantiating the former, Descartes had also demonstrated the truth of "*sum res cogitans*". Arnauld, on the other hand, charged that Descartes had said nothing to substantiate the latter statement. Altrichter argues that both Spinoza and Arnauld are wrong. The two doctrines are not the same, but the truth of the latter follows from the truth of the former. Having demonstrated the truth of *sum*, Descartes goes on to inquire into the exact nature of the subject of *sum*, i.e. himself. A great deal of what we know about ourselves is vulnerable to the "method of doubt" that Descartes had devised. I can imagine that I have no body, that I have a different set of parents, that I have a different name, and so on. But I cannot imagine myself not thinking. "I think I'm thinking nothing" is as inconsistent as "I think I am not". As a subordinate clause and object of the verb *cogito*, *cogito* is as necessarily true as *sum*. If, however, I cannot conceive of myself as not thinking, then thinking is what makes me what I am; thinking is of my essence: *sum res cogitans*. Descartes, therefore, uses *cogito* rather than any other propositional-attitude verb because we possess the same absolute certainty with regard to *cogito* as we do with regard to *sum* (p. 162).

There are three further studies that I would call examples of historical analysis. "The Triumphant Argument" is a discussion of a thesis advanced by a philosopher of the Megarian school, Diodoros Chronos, to the effect that all real possibilities are necessarily realized in this world. The ontological argument is the subject of a pair of studies—"Concept and Being: Logic as the Way to God?", and "Concept and Being: Logic as the Dead End to God"—which together make a whole. The former is a look at the ontological argument from St Anselm to Kant; the latter is a refutation of St Anselm's and Descartes's versions of it.

Of the non-historical studies, I find "Belief and Possibility", a critique of Ruth Barcan Marcus's answer to Kripke's Puzzle, particularly illustrative of Altrichter's methodology. The puzzle is the following: Let's assume that, for whatever reason, Pierre accepts as true the sentence "Londres est jolie". Later, he gets to London, learns to speak English directly from his English friends (i.e. without the help of an English–French dictionary), and, on the basis of personal experience, comes to accept as true the sentence "London is not pretty". It seems plausible that if someone accepts a sentence as true, he will also believe the proposition the sentence expresses. It seems just as plausible that if a sentence is true, any translation of it is also true. It also makes sense to suppose that a person who is in the least rational—and let us assume that Pierre is no less—will not concurrently entertain beliefs which are obviously contradictory. The question now is what exactly Pierre believes concerning London. Judging by the sentences he has subscribed to, he believes that London both is and is not pretty. But if he is in the least rational, he cannot believe this.

The solution Marcus offers is based on two principles. One is the principle of ideal rationality, the notion that the ideal reasonable individual will not simultaneously hold two manifestly contradictory beliefs, and will draw the conclusions that logically follow from his beliefs. The other, more important principle is the possibility condition of belief: for X to believe that p, it must be possible that p. In other words, we cannot believe the impossible. To substantiate this claim, Marcus offers the intuition that if something one believed turns out to be impossible, one interprets the situation not as having had a change of beliefs, but as having been mistaken as to one's beliefs in the first place. These two principles, naturally, allow us to conclude that it is not the case that Pierre believes that London is both pretty and not pretty. But, objects Altrichter, this does not solve the puzzle, for *even if we accept Marcus's* argument, we still cannot tell what it is that Pierre really believes.

Altrichter then goes on to challenge the possibility condition. He makes two major points. One: We do indeed believe things that turn out to be impossible. Two: Whether one believes something or not is a function of whether or not it turns out to be impossible. In other words, my beliefs depend not just on me alone.

Though Altrichter adduces some good examples to support these objections, they do not necessarily undermine the possibility criterion. For there are two ways to understand "belief". According to the one view, a belief is something we *have*; it is an inherent mental state of sorts. This is the everyday use of the word "belief", and if this is what we mean by it, then the possibility criterion is indeed untenable. Altrichter, for his part, is reluctant to put some philosophical construct in place of the everyday sense of words. It is probable, however, that in this case his reserve is ill-advised. For in its other, non-everyday sense, a belief is something that we *attribute*. A belief is not simply something we have in our heads, but is the construct through which we interpret behavior, both our own and that of others. The fact that Marcus mentions Davidson time and again suggests that it is this second sense of "belief" that she has in mind. And on this interpretation of the word, the notion that a possibility criterion attaches to our beliefs is not altogether absurd. For when we attribute a belief to someone, we assume that that individual is more or less rational. If his behavior is inconsistent, e.g., if he says things that are obviously contradictory, we are unable to think of him as actually *believing* what he says: we cannot attribute the relevant beliefs to him. That is why we are at a loss for what to think of Pierre. (All of which, of course, is not to say that Marcus's possibility criterion is tenable in exactly the form that she suggests.)

It will be evident from all of the above that Altrichter's approach has proven extraordinarily fruitful in the case of a whole range of problems. We shall now look at a study that illustrates the limits of its effectiveness. In "The Enigmas of Certainty", Altrichter seeks to reconstruct Wittgenstein's epistemology on the basis of the notes the latter made during the last eighteen months of his life, which were posthumously published as *On Certainty*. The result is rather disappointing; there seems to be no way to identify where Wittgenstein stands on the classical problems of epistemology. Instead of coherent and detailed discussions, all we find is a series of enigmas.

The first enigma, as Altrichter sees it, concerns Wittgenstein's concept of knowledge. It is pretty clear that Wittgenstein does not accept the Cartesian notion that knowledge is a mental state capable, through introspection, of being clearly distinguished from belief. At the same time, it seems that he does accept the Platonist notion that knowledge is justified belief. The enigma Altrichter points out is that the Platonist view is incompatible with

Wittgenstein's comments in the *Philosophical Investigations* to the effect that the concepts we operate with all show a family resemblance. If this is so, we cannot speak of our concepts as meeting a set of necessary and sufficient conditions: there is no set of conditions which everything that we call a concept meets, and which at the same time describes our concepts in some non-trivial way. The Platonist view, on the other hand, defines exactly such a set. Thus, we are left with having to choose between what Wittgenstein says of knowledge in *On Certainty*, and what he says of it in the *Investigations*.

For my part, I think that Altrichter is somewhat over-interpreting Wittgenstein when he finds him subscribing to the Platonist notion of knowledge as true belief. There are comments of Wittgenstein's that can be taken as tending in that direction, but nowhere does he say that his intention is to define the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge. Assuming this to be true removes only the dilemma, of course; the enigma remains, for just what Wittgenstein thinks knowledge is will still be an open question.

The second enigma has to do with what serves as the basis of knowledge. Wittgenstein distinguishes the justification given for a particular belief from the system of reference in which all justification takes place. We learn that this system of reference is open neither to substantiation nor refutation; it cannot be challenged, it is contingent, and changes relative to time and circumstances. The trouble is that there is no way of identifying just what this system of reference might be. At times, Wittgenstein says that our knowledge is based on actions; at other times, that it is based on sentences. Altrichter finds both to be equally problematic, with no clear way out of the dilemma.

The third enigma has to do with Wittgenstein's theory of meaning. On the one hand, he seems to accept the use theory of meaning, i.e., that meaning is what language users actually do with their language. This in itself raises a number of problems, since for practically every proposition, we can think of dozens of situations in which it can be used, and Wittgenstein does not tell us whether or not all these situations pertain to the meaning of the sentence.[2] More problematic yet, as Altrichter sees it, is the fact that Wittgenstein seems to subscribe to the truth condition theory of meaning, a theory incompatible with the use theory of meaning. However, I think there is a way out of this dilemma. For if by truth conditions we understand verificationist truth conditions, i.e., criteria of verifiability—and paragraphs 80–81, which Altrichter quotes, certainly allow this interpretation—then the two theories of meaning will emerge as compatible. We might say that a person is capable of using a sentence if he knows what conditions would lead him to accept it as true or reject it as false. This solution, of course,

---

2 ■ The answer that the use theory of meaning applies to words and not sentences only raises new problems: what is the meaning of the sentences, and how does it relate to the meaning of the constituent words?

rests on verificationism, i.e., the notion that truth has to do with verifiability.

The fourth enigma found by Altrichter pertains to Wittgenstein's views on skepticism. It is clear that he does not accept Moore's refutation of skepticism. Altrichter uses a distinction introduced by Carnap to shed light on the matter. In connection with any language, Carnap distinguishes between internal and external questions. The former are framed within the language, the latter from an external perspective and pertain to the language as a whole. What Moore did, argues Altrichter, was only to show that skepticism is untenable with regard to the internal questions. From Wittgenstein's point of view this hardly amounts to much, since the questions of real interest to skeptics are the external ones. Given that questions can only be put in some language or other, the skeptic is faced with the problem of wanting to put questions which he has no way to formulate. The enigma here, in Altrichter's opinion, is whether or not Wittgenstein believes that the above argument amounts to a refutation of skepticism. Assuming that there is no way for the skeptic to formulate his questions, does the falsehood of skepticism follow? With this question, Wittgenstein leaves us hanging in midair.

The study sketches a picture of Wittgenstein so disconcertingly negative that it leaves us wondering: if he was that obscure and incoherent, how did he ever manage to become one of the most influential philosophers of the century? The problem, as I see it, is that Altrichter has misconstrued Wittgenstein. Not so much on actual points of textual analysis—though he says a number of things that one could take exception to—as in his approach as a whole. For one thing, Altrichter insists on interpreting Wittgenstein's philosophical "fragments" as a coherent text. The musings we read in *On Certainty* were not intended for public consumption. Written in a sort of conceptual shorthand, they are ideas Wittgenstein jotted down from time to time, and were never meant to form a consistent whole. It is hardly surprising to find Altrichter frustrated in his "attempt to view the last philosophical excursions of a solitary thinker as more systematic than they are" (p. 357).

Still, though Wittgenstein's fragments defy Altrichter's attempts to give them a coherent interpretation, it is possible to discover in them certain motifs. One can try to identify the problems that Wittgenstein struggles with, and determine the drift of his answers. This is what Altrichter, too, ends up doing with *On Certainty*, though I feel it is only in his discussion of the fourth "enigma" that he really hits the nail on the head. Altrichter's second "enigma"— the question of what Wittgenstein considers to be the basis of knowledge—raises some pertinent considerations too, though one could also make a case for Wittgenstein's subscribing to the coherence theory of truth. The remaining two of Altrichter's "enig-

mas", it seems to me, have little to do with Wittgenstein's fragments. Though some of the things he says do point in the direction of the Platonist concept of truth, and this notion is indeed incompatible with the family resemblance view of concepts, the whole problem is hardly a focal issue for Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*. The inconsistencies one can discover in his comments on the subject are also more than likely due to his considering it to be of little importance. Much the same holds true of the dilemma in which Altrichter finds himself in connection with the use theory vs. the truth condition theory of meaning. There are contradictions which facilitate our better understanding of a philosopher (or a problem); and then there are trivial inconsistencies which only show that even philosophers are not always as alert as they might be. In this particular study, Altrichter seems to devote too much attention to the latter.

Altrichter's difficulty in handling a philosophical work as diffuse as *On Certainty* has its roots, I believe, in his very strong views on the nature of philosophy. As he sees it, philosophy deals with well-defined problems. Wittgenstein, for his part, rejected the classical problems of philosophy as the spurious products of the mistaken use of language. He would have nothing to do with the traditional problems to which Altrichter seeks solutions; Altrichter, on the other hand, wants to glean answers to traditional problems from Wittgenstein's texts. Wittgenstein's writings strike Altrichter as enigmatic precisely because there are no answers of this kind to be had. In the case of a thinker as original as Wittgenstein, Altrichter, with his problem-centric approach, risks reading into the text problems altogether alien to it.

Another difficulty is that while Altrichter holds philosophy to be a science, Wittgenstein repudiates the very notion of a scientific philosophy. Altrichter thus has expectations of Wittgenstein which the latter never had any intention of meeting. Altrichter wants clearly argued doctrines, whereas Wittgenstein adduces one example after the other in the hope that the reader will notice something.

A third difficulty is that Altrichter is interested in specific problems, while for Wittgenstein these are of interest only insofar as they are illustrations of "the human condition". What Altrichter sees as the goal of the journey is, for Wittgenstein, just another stop.

All of this is not to say that Wittgenstein is fated to remain forever a barren enigma to philosophers of Altrichter's cast of mind. Certainly this was not true in the case of Hanson and Kripke, whose approach has much in common with Altrichter's. These philosophers, however, did not try for a comprehensive interpretation, but took from Wittgenstein only those tidbits which promised to be the most fruitful from the point of view of their own philosophical preoccupations.

That the limitations of Altrichter's philosophical approach are no reflection on his own versatility is well illustrated by another study in the volume, "Renaissance, Reformation and Cartesianism." Lucidly presented and indicative of Altrichter's masterful understanding of the historical milieu, the essay, like the study on the *Cogito...*, deals with Descartes's epistemology. This, however, is about all it has in common with the other studies in the volume. Altrichter paints a detailed and colorful picture of the shifting fortunes of belief and knowledge in the course of the Renaissance, and places Descartes against this background, obliging us to revise a number of our preconceptions about the period. For instance, we learn that far from being the age of the birth of capitalism, the Renaissance was a time of recession and economic stagnation. We also learn that the Catholic Church was not engaged in a desperate struggle against the Copernican world view from the moment of its inception, but coexisted with it peacefully for over seventy years.

Perhaps the most important of Altrichter's conclusions is his confirmation of the old charge against Descartes to the effect that his epistemology was the secularized, philosophical version of the Reformation. Descartes, Altrichter argues, did for knowledge what Luther did for faith. Luther's conflict with the Church of Rome was not over a few dogmas. Nor was it about his appeals to the Bible and to the authority of the early Fathers of the Church, nor his rejection of scholasticism and his declaration of the primacy of faith over reason: all this was typical of the reform movements that cropped up within the Church from time to time. Luther became the father of the Reformation because he refused to subscribe to the *regula fidei*, the Church's set of rules for deciding the truth or falsity of any religious teaching. The rule was a composite of three elements: the Bible (as the Church interpreted it); the rulings of the Church councils; and the papal declarations. As Luther saw it, all three were contingent, human factors totally unsuited for deciding the truth in matters of faith. For absolute certainty in matters of faith, a certainty free of the accretion of human weakness, a new criterion of truth was needed. The only such criterion was Revelation. Thus, matters of faith were to be decided by reading the Bible and taking it literally, never mind the explications given by the councils and the popes. To the objection that the Bible, like any other text, was open to interpretation Luther answered that every Christian was capable of interpreting it for himself, not only because the Bible was clear and easy to follow, but also because God Himself would be his guide. In reading the Bible, listening to one's conscience is listening to God; and because God does not deceive, one can rely on one's conscience absolutely.

All this, submits Altrichter, runs neck to neck with Descartes's epistemology. Like Luther, Descartes was also after absolute certainty, and sought to find it by means of a new *criterion of truth*. Like Luther, Descartes, too, democratized the criterion of truth; truth was no longer the monopoly of a select few. As Luther saw every Christian as capable of arriving at the truth, so Descartes saw every individual as capable of understanding it. What for Luther is the voice of conscience is for Descartes the voice of reason. Truth, as Luther sees it, is what your conscience tells you; as Descartes sees it, it is what you perceive clearly and distinctly. In Luther's system, God guarantees the reliability of one's conscience; in Descartes's system, He guarantees the reliability of reason. Whatever we perceive clearly and distinctly must be true, for God would not give us powers of reasoning which would deceive us. If He did, He would be a deceiver; but God does not deceive; thus, we can safely rely on reason.

Altrichter also shows that the mental experiment of wholesale skepticism that Descartes runs in the *Meditations* is not some rhetorical device, a dramatic touch to heighten the effect of his conclusions. Far from being an intellectual posture, skepticism was a current of considerable influence during the Renaissance, and Descartes was determined to provide its refutation, once and for all. In this connection, Altrichter explodes the myth that the Renaissance skeptics were really targeting only scholasticism, with a view to clearing the way for the new science. This is the interpretation that distinguishes two kinds of doubt in Cartesianism: "good doubt" aimed at eradicating the mistaken preconceptions of traditional philosophical thought; and "bad doubt", skepticism for the sake of doubting, which leads nowhere.

This interpretation, Altrichter argues, is no more tenable than the historical analysis on which it is based. Descartes's skepticism is one and indivisible. The skepticism of the Renaissance is a more complex matter. One current was the humanist revolt against scholasticism: having grown into a kind of radical anti-intellectualism, this current turned its back not only on the scholastics, but on Descartes and Galilei as well. The other current was that fostered by the establishment: as Erasmus's debate with Luther shows, skepticism was one of the weapons the Church used in its fight against the Reformation. For if man had no way of distinguishing true belief from false, Luther's expectation that every Christian would find his own answers in the Bible on matters of faith was an illusion. And if it was an illusion, mankind had no alternative but to rely on the wisdom of tradition, the Catholic Church.

The above study might best be characterized as a piece of intellectual history. Altrichter shows himself as much a master of this genre as of historical analysis. It would make fascinating reading to see him capitalize on both approaches in an entire book on Descartes. ❏