

Three Ideals of Modern Philosophy

Modern philosophy set for itself the three ideals of simplicity, certainty, and linear comprehensiveness. These operated as regulative ideals guiding inquiry and philosophical expositions, but were not themselves justified by means of arguments, and seldom articulated in an explicit way. The starting point for philosophical investigations was to be restricted to a number of simple ideas or concepts about which we could attain certainty. This certainty was thought to guarantee truth in what we say with or about these simple elements. It was thus a certainty accompanied by infallibility. On the basis of this foundation, more complex ideas or propositions were to be analyzed and understood, and a comprehensive system constructed in a linear form that progressed from the relatively simple and certain to the increasingly complex. Eventually, the most controversial issues debated by philosophers, those of metaphysics, would be resolved. What we describe as “philosophic understanding” was regarded as the result of such analysis and resolution on the basis of the simple and certain foundation. These three ideals can be regarded as being pursued, albeit in very different ways, in Descartes’s *Meditations*, Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume’s *Treatise on Human Nature*, and Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*. In less explicit form they dominate many of the major philosophic writings from the 17th century into the present, with differences to be found principally in the consistency and thoroughness with which they were pursued.

This chapter is principally concerned with a review of various historical reformulations of these ideals and criticisms of attempts to carry them out that have been widely accepted within recent philosophy. Such criticisms may seem to some to vindicate the wholesale dismissal of enlightenment rationalism by literary philosophers within the movement labeled “post-modernism.” But the more sensible response, I think, is to revise the modern ideals, substituting for them others that are derived from them. A revisionary proposal will be described in the second chapter.

1.1. Simplicity and Certainty

Simplicity is not a clearly defined philosophic concept. It is often understood in terms of part-whole and dependence relations derived from analogies with physical elements. Sub-particles are regarded as simple relative to the particles they combine to form in the sense they can exist independently of these wholes, while the existence of the wholes is dependent on them as parts. In the same way, particles are simple relative to atoms, atoms simple relative to molecules, molecules to cells, and cells to many-celled organisms. In this hierarchy the absolutely simple are those independently existing elements without parts – the fundamental particles of physics – while all other elements are simple only relative to the level at which they function as parts.

This combinatorial part-whole conception can also be understood in terms of analysis and logical derivation. Suppose we can translate one expression E into another F in such a way as to preserve the sense of the original. If F happens to be a whole composed of other expressions F_1, F_2, \dots, F_n , then the part-whole conception of simplicity combines with translatability to constitute an analytic or reductionist conception. The constituent expressions F_1, F_2, \dots, F_n are regarded as simple relative to E , and philosophers have regarded E as being “reduced to” or “analyzed into” these simple expressions. Normally reductions of a term E are formulated by stating necessary and sufficient conditions for its application that employ only the terms F_1, F_2, \dots, F_n . As we shall see below in Section 3.1, sometimes metaphysics supplies the motivation for a given reduction. Some philosophers have also sought simplicity in a select class of “basic” or “atomic” propositions from which complex propositions are generated by combinatorial rules. The goal of logical analysis has been to isolate the members of this select class and specify the rules for their combination. The nature of this project will be described below. Finally, philosophers have used a conception of simplicity based on relations of logical derivation between propositions. If from proposition p we can derive q , while p cannot be derived from q , then p is regarded as simple relative to q . The relation between p and q can be either deductive or inductive, but not both.

While simplicity can be conceived in this variety of ways, forcing us to select from and perhaps combine them, certainty poses no such problems. It is a psychological state we recognize in both ourselves and others. The problem we encounter with it is rather its variability and untrustworthiness. What we are certain of today may be doubted tomorrow, and often eventually proves to be false. Starting with Descartes, modern philosophers sought a special type of philosophic certainty immune from such variability and falsehood. This they thought they could accomplish by combining certainty and simplicity. This combination is represented by Descartes’s proposition ‘I

think' as both simple, that is, not analyzable into or derivable from other more basic propositions, and as certain, as incapable of doubt. This certainty was of such a kind to guarantee the truth of the proposition, to confer on it infallibility. Few have questioned the certainty of Descartes's starting point. It does indeed seem impossible to doubt it, just as he claims. But exactly why we should regard it as simple in the sense of providing a basis for deriving other propositions is far less clear. This is because not even Descartes's most direct conclusion, the proposition 'I am', or 'I exist', is derivable from it. The conclusion that a mind, ego, or person exists as the subject of thinking could be claimed to follow only if 'I think' is comparable to 'This chair is brown', with 'I' referring to a kind of object in a manner analogous to the way 'this chair' refers to the chair. In fact, however, the personal pronoun has a very different function, as we shall see below in Section 5.5. If not even 'I exist' follows from 'I think', then of course neither do other conclusions he seeks to draw about controversial issues of free will and the relation of mind to body.

More promising as a form of deriving the complex from the simple would seem to be the project initiated by Locke in his *Essay* of analyzing what he called "complex ideas" into "simple ideas" as a means of surveying the limits of human knowledge. As commentators on the *Essay* have noted, Locke uses the term 'idea' in two senses. Sometimes he means by it what he refers to as "particular ideas," or what Hume was to later call "impressions," the sensory images directly accessible to consciousness. Sensations of pain and tickles, as well as visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactual sensory images, would all be examples of ideas in this sense. Within conscious experience Locke thought we could isolate discrete simple elements such as shapes, colors, sounds, smells, and tactile feelings. From combinations of these elements are formed complex sensory images such as colored shapes or painful touches of hot, sharp edges. Locke believed these simple elements to be direct effects of objects as mediated by causal transmissions and sense organs. For each different simple idea there would be a corresponding difference in the object causally producing it. A complex sensory image is thus regarded as a mosaic composed of simple images (later called "sense data") as parts, each varying with some aspect of an object to which it is causally correlated.

This part-whole conception of sensory images has been decisively repudiated by experimental psychology. As the Gestalt psychologists first began noting in the 1930s, we are aware of sensory fields within which we discriminate certain salient parts from a background. Within the visual field these parts are colored shaped figures, what Locke regarded as complex ideas, as prominent against a relatively neutral background. Our sense receptors have evolved as means of detecting contrasts within these fields,



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