Chapter 10

THE INTERCONNECTIONS
The Systemic Interlinkage of Philosophical Issues

1. INTRODUCTION

In interpreting a philosophical text it is needful to assess its implications not just for the matters immediately at issue but for the larger picture as well. For it is inherent in the aporetic situation of philosophy that philosophical issues in areas that seem far removed from one another are in fact so closely interrelated that a position taken on the one has profound implications for positions one can or cannot take on the other. In philosophy details do not stand free—supported only by their own feet. Philosophical positions—even across widely separated domains—are interrelated in such a way that, however widely separated they may seem to be, there are nevertheless strong interactions between them. Accordingly, we can only avoid the systematist’s concern for the interconnectedness of local issues only at the price of compromising the adequacy of the localist’s concern for matters of detail.

2. EXAMPLE 1: EPISTEMOLOGY AND ETHICS

Suppose that we are sailing on the open seas in a vacation cruise ship. It is dusk and the visibility is beginning to be poor. We are strolling along the starboard side of the ship, when suddenly there is a shout: “Man overboard.” Someone grabs a life preserver from the nearby bulkhead and rushes with it towards the side of the ship. Suddenly he comes to a stop and hesitates for a time. To our astonishment he turns, retraces his steps, and replaces the life preserver—calmly proceeding step by step as the region of the incident slips away, first out of reach, then out of sight. Puzzled and chagrined we turn to the individual and ask him why he broke off the rescue attempt. His response runs as follows: “Of course, throwing that life preserver was my first instinct, as my behavior clearly showed. But suddenly some ideas from my undergraduate epistemology courses came to
mind and convinced me that it made no sense to continue.” Intrigued, we ask for more details. He responds as follows:

What did we actually know? All we could see was that something that looked like a human head was bobbing out there in the water. But the visibility was poor. It could have been an old mop or a lady’s wig stand. Those noises we took for distant shouts would well have been no more than a pulsing of the engines. There was simply no decisive evidence that it was actually a person out there. And then I remembered William Kingdon Clifford’s dictum: “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” So why act on a belief that there was actually a human being in danger out there, when the evidence for any such belief was clearly insufficient? And why carry out a rescue attempt when you do not accept that somebody needs rescuing?

Something has clearly gone wrong here. Even if we don’t choose to fault our misguided shipmate as an epistemologist, we will incline to wonder about his moral competency.

Even if I unhesitatingly accept and endorse the principle that one must try to be helpful to others in situations of need, I am clearly in moral difficulty if I operate too stringent a standard of evidence in relevant contexts. For then I will be systematically precluded from doing things that, morally considered, I ought to do.

To operate in life with epistemological principles that impede one in the discharge of “normal” moral obligations is to invite justified reproach. Where the interests of others are potentially at risk, we cannot with moral appropriateness deploy evidential standards of acceptability of a higher, more demanding sort than those standardly operative in the community. At this point, epistemology has moral ramifications. For morality as we know it requires a relatively common-sense epistemology for its appropriate implementation. And so, in this regard, the stance we take in the one domain has significant repercussions for the way we must proceed in the other. The issues stand in systemic inter linkage.

3. EXAMPLE 2: SEMANTICS AND METAPHYSICS

Let us turn to another example of a very different sort. Consider the semantical position urged by an influential Oxford philosopher who asserts that there are no incognizable facts, maintaining that there indeed is a fact of the matter only when a claim to this effect is such that “we [humans]
could in a finite time bring ourselves into a position in which we were [fully] justified either in asserting or denying [the contention at issue].”¹ This sort of “finite decidability semantics” holds that a proposition is meaningful—qualifies as inherently true or false—only if the matter can actually be settled decisively and conclusively, one way or the other, by a finite effort in a limited time.

But this inherently not implausible view leads to some pretty strange destinations. For one thing, it requires us to abandon our common-sense view of the world about us. For as we standardly think about things within the conceptual framework of our fact-oriented thought and discourse, any real physical object has more facets than it will or indeed can ever actually manifest in experience. For every objective property of a real thing has consequences of a dispositional character and these are never actually surveyable in toto because the dispositions which particular concrete things inevitably have endow them with an infinitistic aspect that cannot be comprehended within experience. This desk, for example, has a limitless manifold of phenomenal features of the type: “having a certain appearance from a particular point of view”. It is perfectly clear that most of these will never be actualized in experience. Moreover, a thing is what it does: entity and lawfulness are coordinated correlates—a good Kantian point. And this fact that things demand lawful comportment means that the finitude of experience precludes any prospect of the exhaustive manifestation of the descriptive facets of any real things.²

Physical things as we standardly conceive them not only have more properties than they ever will overtly manifest, but they have more than they can possibly ever can actually manifest because the dispositional properties of things always involve what might be characterized as mutually preemptive conditions of realization. The cube of sugar, for example, has the dispositional property of reacting in a particular way if subjected to a temperature of 10,000°C and of reacting in a certain way if emplaced for one hundred hours in a large, turbulent body of water. But if either of these conditions is ever realized, it will destroy the lump of sugar as a lump of sugar, and thus block the prospect of its ever bringing the other property to manifestation. The perfectly possible realization of various dispositions always fail to be mutually composable, and so the dispositional properties of a thing cannot ever be manifested in toto—not just in practice, but in principle.

The existence of this latent (hidden, occult) sector of dispositional features is a crucial facet of our conception of a real thing. Our objective claims about real things always commit us to more than we can possibly
ever determine about them. To say of the apple that its only features are those it actually manifests is to run afoul of our conception of an apple. To deny—or even merely to refuse to be committed to the claim—that it would manifest particular features if certain conditions came about (for example, that it would have such-and-such a taste if eaten) is to be driven to withdrawing the claim that it is an apple. The process of corroborating the implicit contents of our objective factual claims about anything real is potentially endless, and such judgments are thus “non-terminating” in C. I. Lewis’ sense. This cognitive inexhaustibility of our objective factual claims inherent in the fact that their content will always outrun the content of any finite body of evidence for making them. Even G. E. Moore’s paradigm of a claim of common sense realism, “this is a human hand,” exemplifies this circumstance. For this assertion has an unending variety of factual consequences (“The hand will not turn into gold if shaken rapidly”) that we can never actually control.

A real thing is always conceptualized as having experience-transcending features. All discourse about objective things involves an element of experience-transcending imputation—of commitment to claims that go beyond the experientially acquirable information, but yet claims whose rejection would mean our having to withdraw the thing-characterization at issue. To say of something that it is an apple or a stone or a tree is to become committed to claims about it that go beyond the data we have—and even beyond those which we can, in the nature of things, ever actually acquire. Any claim about the objective features of real things carries us beyond the limits of experience—actual experience certainly and very possibly possible experience as well.

A finite decidability semantics—though seemingly a merely linguistic doctrine about meaningful assertion—is accordingly not just a theory of language or logic. It has repercussions in very different domains. For example, it has far-reaching metaphysical consequences because it immediately precludes any prospect of a common sense realism. Any statement of objective fact—however modest and common sensical—is immediately rendered meaningless by the infinitude of its evidential ramifications. And so a semantical theory seemingly devised to serve the interests of a philosophy of language has implications that preempt a major substantive position in theoretical metaphysics.

Its conflict with common sense realism does not, of course, show that finite decidability semantics is wrong. But it does once again illustrate vividly the systemic interconnectedness of philosophical doctrines.
4. APORIES

It lies in the very nature of the discipline that in philosophy we often face aporetic situations in which various theses that individually have much to be said for them prove to be collectively incompatible.

Now, doing nothing is not a rationally viable option when we are confronted with such situations of aporetic inconsistency. Something has to give. Some one (at least) of those incompatible contentions at issue must be abandoned. Apories constitute situations of forced choice: an inconsistent family of theses confronts us with an unavoidable choice among alternative positions.

Consider, for example, the following apory:

1. All knowledge is based on observation. (Empiricism)

2. We can only observe matters of empirical fact.

3. From empirical facts we cannot infer values. (The fact-value divide)

4. Knowledge about values is possible. (Value cognitivism)

Give that (2) and (3) entail that value statements cannot be inferred from observations, we arrive via (1) at the denial of (4). Inconsistency is upon us. There are four ways out of this trap:

1-Rejection: There is also nonobservational—namely, intuitive or instinctive—knowledge: specifically of matters of value (value-intuitionism; moral-sense theories).

2-Rejection: Observation is not only sensory but also affective (sympathetic, empathetic). It thus can yield not only factual information but value information as well (value-sensibility theories).

3-Rejection: While we cannot deduce values from empirical facts, we can certainly infer them from the facts, by various sorts of plausible reasoning, such as “inference to the best explanation” (values-as-fact theories).
4-Rejection: Knowledge about values is impossible (positivism, value skepticism).

Such an analysis brings out a significant interrelationship that obtains in the theory of value between the issue of observation (as per (2)-rejection) and the issue of confirmation (as per (3)-rejection). It makes strange bedfellows.

Again, consider the apory:

1. A (cognitively) meaningful statement must be verifiable-in-principle.
2. Claims regarding what obtains in all times and places are not verifiable in principle.
3. Laws of nature characterize processes that obtain in all times and places.
4. Statements that formulate laws of nature are cognitively meaningful.

Four exits from inconsistency are available here:

1-Rejection: Maintain a purely semantical theory of meaning that decouples meaningfulness from epistemic considerations.

2-Rejection: Accept a latitudinarian theory of verification that countenances remote inductions as modes of verification.

3-Rejection: Adopt a view of laws that sees them as local regularities.

4-Rejection: Maintain a radical scepticism with respect to claims regarding laws of nature, one which sees all such law-claims as meaningless.

This apory locks four very different issues into mutual relevancy: (i) the theory-of-meaning doctrine that revolves about thesis (1), (ii) the metaphysical view regarding laws of nature at issue in thesis (2), (iii) a philosophy-of-science doctrine regarding the nature of natural laws as operative in thesis (3), and finally (iv) a language-oriented position regarding the meaningfulness of law claims. And the collision between these doctrines in the
apory at issue means that the stance that we take on some of these issues will block the position we can take on others—even though they seem to be, on first view, to lie in a different and remote domain.

5. INTERCONNECTEDNESS REEMPHASIZED

The various examples we have considered convey a clear lesson. Philosophical issues are inherently interconnected. And we all too easily risk losing sight of the interconnectedness of philosophical issues when we ride our hobby horses in the pursuit of the technicalities of a limited subdomain. The stance we take on questions in one domain have substantial implications and ramifications for very different issues in other, seemingly distant domains. We cannot emplace our philosophical convictions into conveniently separated compartments in the comfortable expectation that what we maintain in one area will have no unwelcome implications for what we are inclined to maintain in other domains. Because of their inherent interrelationships, philosophical positions generally form parts of such aporetic clusters, and we cannot resolve these apories without due concern for the systematic aspects of philosophical deliberation. A serious philosopher must be prepared to address the toilsome and not always welcome task of reevaluating one’s favored solutions of the problems in the field of one’s special interest in the light of their implications for other, seemingly remote domains.

The systemic interconnectedness of philosophical issues means that the price philosophers will pay for over-narrow specialization—for confining attention narrowly to one particular set of issues—is the potential incoherence of their overall positions.

Philosophizing is in this regard something akin to cognitive engineering. We have to keep all our commitments in reasonable balance overall. The sensible philosopher, like the sensible engineer, must proceed holistically, with a view to the overall implications of his particular resolutions. We would certainly laugh at the engineer who offered to build us a super-safe car—but one that will only go only two miles per hour. Surely, a similar derision is deserved by the sceptic who offers to build us a supersafe error—excluding epistemology that would not, however, allow us, say, ever to apply our moral principles to concrete cases or to maintain a line of distinction between science and pseudoscience.

An engineer who lets one particular desideratum (cost, safety, efficiency, or the like) function all-decisively to the exclusion of all else would
not produce a viable product but an absurdity. And this situation obtains in philosophy as well.

6. HERMENEUTIC IMPLICATIONS

These deliberations convey a clear lesson. To understand a philosophical contention or doctrine one has no alternative but to examine its wider ramifications across the larger terrain than what lies immediately to hand. Philosophy’s doctrinal contentions always have a larger setting of interrelations defined by the nature of their aporetic environment and they cannot be properly grasped or explained until their wider implications are duly heeded. In interpreting philosophical deliberations one must always look beyond text to context.

NOTES


2 This aspect of objectivity was justly stressed in the “Second Analogy” of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, though his discussion rests on ideas already contemplated by Leibniz, Philosophische Schriften, edited by C.I. Gerhardt, (Berlin: Weidmann, 1890), Vol. VII, pp. 319-22.