ON METHODS OF REFUTATION IN METAPHYSICS

A PROBLEM OF RATIONAL DISBELIEF

What I wish to open up is a sub-problem of the problem of rationality. Most of us who think of ourselves as rational men would like to be able to give reasonable reasons for the things we believe. What is much less explored is the opposite problem, regarding the things we do not believe, of being able to find reasonable reasons against the things we disbelieve. This problem arises because so many systems of philosophy are put on the shelf without being firmly refuted. Consider, for example, the system of Spinoza or of Berkeley or of Kant. It is the dominant outlook in the Anglo-American philosophical world to regard most of these philosophies as outdated and as saying very little that can be taken seriously. There may be justice in this view: quite possibly there are very few living issues in many of these philosophers. But one must take them seriously if for no other reason than that there is no standard refutation of them. But if you look back on attempts to discuss historical philosophies, it is extraordinary how little agreement there is to be found on what is wrong with them. We all know that there is no agreement about positive contributions to philosophy, but there is equally little agreement on what shall be rejected and how. It seems to me very curious that there should be no way of settling these matters. In view of this I have cast around for various methods by which metaphysical views, if they should be false, might be rejected. That, in short is my problem.

SYNTHETIC A PRIORI METAPHYSICS

If you cast your mind back over the great philosophies of the past, to consider how you might refute them, you are bound to consider the notion of a synthetic a priori proposition, upon which the whole Kantian philosophy was built; and the question must arise whether the notion of such propositions can be refuted.
A synthetic proposition is a priori if, though synthetic, it is necessarily true (or true independently of all experience).

Examples of supposedly synthetic a priori propositions may be taken from Kant himself. Thus causality was a category that applied to the world universally and necessarily. Kant also had some rather unfortunate but still rather instructive examples such as that two straight lines cannot enclose a space. For when he gives examples that we know are not true, this does not encourage us to place much confidence in the concept of the synthetic a priori proposition. Incidentally, I think it was a pity that he used the example of two straight lines not enclosing a space; if he had been bolder and said that one straight line cannot enclose a space it would have been more striking, seeing that in elliptic geometry one straight line can enclose a space.

To try to get some clear idea of what this very curious kind of proposition is, let us remember that a synthetic a priori proposition is not analytical, is not just a tautology. A tautology is a proposition that is true of all possible worlds. But although a synthetic a priori proposition is not tautological it is necessary. Thus it meant a proposition that is true, not of all logically possible worlds, but, I suggest, in all possible worlds of a certain sort, namely of all 'conceivable' worlds. The difference in scope may be shown like this. A tautology contains no information, but a synthetic a priori proposition does or is intended to do so. This, of course, is a stumbling block; practically no modern logician of any school could swallow the possibility of an a priori proposition that was other than analytical; and the synthetic a priori proposition is just this. It is worth turning this the other way round, even if it helps only a little, to see what would happen if you tried to deny a synthetic a priori proposition. The denial would be a proposition that is false, and necessarily false, without being self-contradictory. And this is very curious.

The notion of a synthetic a priori proposition is particularly important because it may well be central to most metaphysics. Although Kant introduced the idea of a synthetic a priori proposition only rather late in the history of philosophy, the idea, or its equivalent, can be detected much earlier. There are in particular two ancestors of the idea that I should like to mention. One is the doctrine of innate ideas in Descartes. It is to some extent obscure just what an innate idea really was in Descartes. Nonetheless certain features stand out. An innate idea is characterized as