JOHN WISDOM ON PHILOSOPHY AND METAPHYSICS

INTRODUCTION

It cannot be denied that John Wisdom has had an important influence on contemporary philosophy. He is often quoted and footnoted. He is widely read and respected by critics and supporters of the contemporary scene in philosophy. Oddly enough, however, very little has been written by others about Wisdom's own philosophy, especially with respect to the general questions concerning what might be his own metaphysical and philosophical presuppositions. It is not that people have not made assertions about Wisdom's position on these general matters, but only that few systematic efforts have been made along these lines. In this paper we shall attempt to bring forth a somewhat definitive statement of Wisdom's position on philosophy and metaphysics. In doing so we shall be taking an often dialectical approach. In other words, various positions will be played off against one another with the hope that in the end some sort of synthesis will emerge.

Anyone who has ever read Wisdom knows the problems of this project, i.e., knows the problems of presenting a definitive Wisdomian position. Wisdom's thoughts are often so elusive that any attempt to pin them down should be regarded with suspicion. Indeed, every conclusion which follows could be entirely mistaken. Moreover, one could plausibly object that this paper is flawed at the outset since, in fact, Wisdom has no developed metaphysic of his own and that that is the whole point of Wisdom. In other words, one might say that Wisdom believes that metaphysics is not the kind of human endeavor which can or should be described with any precision or adopted by anyone as their own definitive statement of the structure of reality. All this could very well be true of Wisdom, but I do not believe that what will be said here will totally exclude such a claim. We shall see. In any case, if what follows is distorted I can seek comfort in Wisdom himself, for is it not the case that what is misleading or distorted may nevertheless be illuminating?

We should note at the outset that the terms "philosophy" and "metaphysics" will be used in a loose and often interchangeable way. Since
metaphysical paradoxes are in some sense the paradigm of paradoxes in philosophy, when we speak of the oddities of philosophy we often mean especially the oddities of metaphysics.

PHILOSOPHIC STATEMENTS ARE REALLY VERBAL

Wisdom holds that philosophical statements are verbal (i.e., merely peculiarities in the language system) in three significant senses. The first position is this: philosophical statements are really verbal because they make verbal recommendations. These recommendations are of the sort which request that there ought to be a change in the conventional use of certain words. For example, a philosopher might argue that we should only use the word “know” with sense data or mathematical statements and use the word “probably” with material thing statements. Thus the philosopher would be requesting that, when we speak precisely, we should replace “I know there’s a chair over there” with something like “Very, very probably there’s a chair over there.” As Gasking notes, philosophic statements or questions can be a direct request for a change in convention or a hidden request. In either case, the general point is that philosophic statements function in a language system as a request for a change in a convention of that system. Such requests, however, usually go unheeded outside of the philosophic community.

The second sense in which philosophic statements are verbal is related to the role such statements have within a given language system. There are two basic roles philosophic statements may have with respect to a given language system. The first I term the “justificatory role” and the second the “modal role.” We shall deal with the justificatory role first.

The clearest statement of the justificatory role of philosophic statements is given in Wisdom’s famous article “Philosophy and Psycho-Analysis.” In this article Wisdom draws certain parallels between the philosopher and the neurotic. The behavior of both is rather odd (and in the case of the philosopher it is largely verbal behavior which is odd). For example, neurotics never seem to want to see discussions come to an end, and Wisdom points out that the philosopher, on any given problem, also seems to never want the discussion to come to an end. Yet there is a difference between the philosopher and the neurotic, and the main feature of that difference is that the philosopher, as Wisdom puts it, uses “justificatory talk.” In other