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G. H. von Wright (1916–)

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Georg Henrik von Wright was born and educated in Helsinki, Finland, where his graduate work was supervised by Eino Kaila, a distinguished Finnish philosopher who was connected with the Vienna Circle, and who encouraged von Wright in that direction. Because of conditions on the continent, however, von Wright went to Cambridge in 1939 to study with C. D. Broad, and there he met Wittgenstein and Moore, who, together with Kaila, became the major influences on his philosophical development. He returned to Helsinki after a year and in 1941 received a Ph.D. for his thesis "The Logical Problem of Induction." After the war, he returned to Cambridge as a lecturer and in 1948 was appointed to the Chair of Philosophy in Cambridge, which Wittgenstein and, before him, Moore had held. In 1951 he resigned to return to Helsinki and resume the professorship to which he had been appointed in 1946. In 1961 he was appointed to the Academy of Finland, which at the time comprised twelve persons, whose lifetime membership in the Academy freed them to do their own work.

He has continued to teach and lecture around the world, notably as Professor-at-Large at Cornell, in giving (among others) the Gifford, Tarner, Woodbridge, Tanner, and Leibniz Lectures, and in engaging philosophers from many countries in philosophical conversation of the highest quality. He is the subject of a volume in the "Library of Living Philosophers" (1989), which contains a bibliography of over 400 papers and books (several dozen more have appeared since), essays on his work by thirty-one philosophers, and a notably instructive and interesting autobiography.

Von Wright's philosophical career has been marked by his working through one set of issues, then leaving it to focus on another set, and so on, and I have ordered my discussion of his contributions to reflect those stages in his career. The order is by no means exact, however, because certain themes have persisted throughout his work and because he often returns to issues when he has new things to say.

Induction and probability

Issues related to induction and probability were the focus of his work from his studies for his Ph.D. until the late 1940s. The topic of his doctoral dissertation was the "canons of induction," which Bacon and Mill used to ascertain causes and effects, and which von Wright replaced with the more precise notions of necessary and sufficient condi-

tions in order to restate and re-evaluate the classical canons. This was extended, corrected, and related to probability theory in a number of papers and then in his *Treatise on Probability and Induction*, written in 1948 but not published until 1951. He sums up this work as follows:

> I have tried to show how the probabilifying effect of evidence on a given hypothesis is an isomorphic reflection in numerical terms of a process of eliminating members from a class of hypotheses initially competing with the given one. This eliminative procedure is the logical core of Mill's canons. My aim can thus be said to have been a unification of the two main branches of inductive logic: induction by elimination in the tradition of Bacon and Mill, and induction by confirmation in the tradition founded by the Cambridge logicians J. M. Keynes, C. D. Broad, and W. E. Johnson and later continued by Carnap and others. (1993: 114)

His publications from this period also include studies of the paradoxes of confirmation, a topic to which he has returned (see 1983b), as he has to induction and probability in writing articles on each for the 1959 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Philosophical logic

Von Wright's work on induction and probability was not intended as a contribution to mathematical theories like those of von Mises or Kolmogorov, but as a philosophical study which used formal methods as a way of understanding and improving the concepts we employ in evaluating certain kinds of empirical hypotheses. The same is true of his work in logic: it aimed not to be a contribution to mathematical logic in the style of Gödel, Tarski, or Church but to be a philosophy of logic and a philosophical logic (see TARSKI, CHURCH, GÖDEL). He took the task of logic generally to be "to describe and systematize the principles used in argumentation, inference, and proof," the aim of his own work being philosophical reflection on those principles and the concepts they involve. In the course of that work, a new aim emerged: to extend the application of logic, as it had developed since Frege, to subject matters that traditionally made no explicit use of logical symbols and methods.

The focus of this work was the concept of logical truth, which he began to investigate by considering how far the Tractarian notion of logical truth as tautological could be extended to quantificational logic. He showed that this could be done for simpler quantificational structures, and in so doing invented "distributive normal forms," which others appropriated for technical uses (which included showing precisely how far the notion of a tautology could be extended). This work led to such related topics as conditionals, entailment, negation, and the logical antinomies, on which von Wright wrote clarifying and stimulating papers of the highest quality, from which much may be learned. (The earlier work is in *Logical Studies* (1957) and the more recent in "Philosophical Logic" (1983b).)

While working on the quantifiers, he noticed a parallelism between the structure of "some," "none," and "all" and that of the modal terms "possible," "impossible," and "necessary." Just as the negation of "Some *S* are *P*" is equivalent to "No *S* are *P*," so the negation of "*P* is possible" is equivalent to "*P* is impossible," and just as the negation of

"Some *S* are not *P*" is equivalent to "All *S* are *P*," so the negation of "Not-*P* is possible" is equivalent to "*P* is necessary," and so on. A little later, he noticed the same parallelism for the deontic modal terms "permissible," "forbidden," and "obligatory": "*A* is not permissible" is equivalent to "*A* is forbidden"; "Not-*A* is not permissible" is equivalent to "*A* is obligatory," etc. His project was to articulate these modalities in logical systems, analogous to propositional and predicate logic, which would have precise rules for well-formed formulae and valid inferences, which would enable exact determination of what a claim entailed and what it contradicted, and which would permit investigation of metalogical issues like consistency and completeness. His ideas on how to do this for the strict modalities were written in 1950 (published 1951b), while his proposals for the second appeared in his paper, "Deontic Logic," in the first issue of *Mind* for 1951 (reprinted 1957).

Von Wright showed that further concepts exhibited a similar structure, for example, the epistemic modalities "undecided," "falsified," and "verified" (if *P* is undecided, then *P* is not falsified; if *P* is falsified, then not-P is verified, etc.), and even time and causality can be seen as having a kind of modal structure. Von Wright worked on all these concepts, showing how logical principles, concepts, and methods could be applied to them, thus extending logical investigations into new areas. (For his summary, see 1993 (essays VI and VII) and 1989.) This inspired many others to apply logical techniques and symbolism to diverse philosophical topics, and while this work is too often technically or philosophically uninteresting, some of it has been very significant for both logic and philosophy. The latter, significant, work has prompted the view that this is the best – even the only – way to do analytic philosophy, but that is a view von Wright emphatically rejects.

Ethics, norms, and values

"Deontic Logic" is von Wright's most famous paper, for it created a new subject, which was his own in a special sense. It showed how to symbolize various normative claims and precisely determine their logical interrelations, and it opened up new claims and relations which are difficult to notice outside a logical system. This "logic of norms" remains of great interest to legal philosophers, for instance, who wrestle with such questions as whether two laws are mutually consistent or whether, and in what sense, a system of laws may be consistent or complete.

Von Wright's interest in the logic of norms was sustained because of its connection with issues about truth. He had since his youth been committed to what he calls a "deep conceptual gap separating the world of facts from that of norms and values," and he continues to hold that belief in its radical form as the view that normative judgments are neither true nor false. This raises the problem of how a logic of norms is even possible, for such a logic assumes that there are logical relations between norms and that there are disjunctive and conditional norm sentences, and those assumptions appear to require that norm sentences have truth-value.

In dealing with this problem, von Wright appeals to the distinction between sentences which *give* a norm, and thus are *prescriptive*, and those which *state* that a norm has been given, and thus are *descriptive*, which yields two possibilities for constructing a logic of norms without assuming that normative judgments are true or false. The first

is to have a logic, not of norms as such, but of the sentences which describe given norms and thus have truth-values. The second is to have a logic of norms proper but do not require that logically complex sentences with logical interrelations must have a truth-value, so that "Logic has a wider reach than Truth." Von Wright has changed his mind more than once on which of these ways is better (see 1963a, 1968, 1984), and more recently has suggested a third possibility, which is that deontic logic is "neither a logic of norms nor a logic of norm-propositions but a study of conditions which must be satisfied in rational norm-giving activity" (1993: 111; cf. 1996).

Norm and Action (1963a) and *An Essay in Logic and General Theory of Action* (1968) extend these logical investigations to the actions which norms govern and to the changes involved in actions (which I discuss below). But the study of norms is also part of moral philosophy, which von Wright was pursuing at the same time, largely because of his teaching duties; it resulted in *The Varieties of Goodness*, his main work in moral philosophy. Its central claim is that *moral* senses of "good," and of "right" or "duty," are derivative on non-moral uses of the terms. It is a conceptual inquiry, which aims at making "fixed and sharp that which ordinary usage leaves loose and undetermined," but since it denies that there is any clear distinction between ethics and metaethics, its inquiries into how to improve our moral concepts are also meant to be inquiries into what moral point of view we ought to adopt. It assumes that there can be "a philosophical pursuit deserving the name 'ethics', which shares with a common conception of 'meta-ethics' the feature of being a *conceptual investigation* and with a common concept of 'normative ethics' the feature of aiming at *directing our lives*" (1963b: 6). The book is Aristotelean in its insightful classification of the varieties of goodness, in its taking seriously the notion of virtue, in its taking the human good to be more basic than duty, and in its commitment to there being such a thing as *practical* rationality, which is not inferior to the rationality of the exact sciences. These notions are not rare today, but they were audacious in 1963, and it is understandable that von Wright regards *The Varieties of Goodness* as the best argued of all his works and the most fun to write.

Philosophy of action

Von Wright's work in philosophy of action stemmed from his attempt to get a symbolism adequate to distinguish the various kinds of action governed by norms: to distinguish, for example, what agents do (either by bringing something about or preventing something) from what they do not do (either intentionally or by simply doing nothing). It struck him that such distinctions could not be expressed without a symbolism for different kinds of *change*, and hence he worked at embedding a logic of action in a logic of change, a project to which he has returned a number of times (1963a, 1968, 1973).

Broader issues about action were implicit in this work and became explicit in *Explanation and Understanding* (1971). It argued that explanations of intentional action are logically distinct from explanations in the natural sciences because the latter appeal to causal laws while the former invoke conceptual connections between an agent's reasons and his actions. Explanation of action is, therefore, necessarily connected with practical reason (see 1983a), and the intentional attitudes that function as reasons should be seen, not as internal states with causal powers, but as ways of under-

standing and articulating what agents *mean* by their behavior. He connected this view with the Aristotelean tradition, contrasting it with the Galilean tradition which assimilated explanation of action (and of historical events) to the law-based model of the natural sciences.

Explanation and Understanding reinforced the rejection of a causal model of action by arguing that the concept of cause is inseparable from the concept of (experimental) intervention in nature, and hence inseparable from, indeed derivative on, concepts of action and agency. This implied that the kind of determinism which threatens to undermine the possibility of genuine human agency is self-defeating, a point von Wright has articulated in a number of ways (1973). Indeed, determinism has been a core interest of his since *Explanation and Understanding*, which has been expressed partly in logical investigations into issues such as kinds of necessity and knowledge and truth about the future (1984), partly in discussions of explanation and free will (1973), partly in criticisms of the way determinism encourages a “reified conception” of people and social institutions as governed by universal laws (1983a, 1993).

Philosophy of mind

Von Wright first encountered philosophy as a youth through the mind–body problem, but he wrote nothing about it until his Tanner Lectures, “Of Human Freedom” in 1984 (reprinted in *In the Shadow of Descartes*, 1998), when reflection on the relation of neuro-physiological explanation and action explanation led to some remarks on psycho-physical parallelism. He then began to write extensively on the philosophy of mind but published little until his 1998 book, which has papers on the relation of physiological and action explanation, on the concepts of quality and thing, and on perception and sensation (with special attention to sounds). The papers do not form a unity and do not discuss current literature and controversies (of which von Wright is by no means ignorant), but they manifest an intense effort to get clear on some of the most difficult and fundamental issues in philosophy of mind, and they contain a wealth of distinctions and observations which may prove productive.

Wittgenstein

Von Wright knew Wittgenstein well, was named as one of his literary executors, and has devoted enormous time and effort to his large and extraordinarily complex *Nachlass*. He has searched for lost material, interviewed persons who knew Wittgenstein, organized and indexed the papers (see *Wittgenstein*, von Wright 1982), and edited several volumes of his correspondence and manuscripts. While he has written relatively few papers on Wittgenstein’s thought, these volumes include some splendid studies, which have been published (along with his moving “Biographical Sketch”) in his 1982 book.

While von Wright was deeply impressed by his encounters with Wittgenstein, who no doubt influenced his work in numerous ways, he has chosen his own path. His work on philosophy of action and of mind are the most Wittgensteinian in content (his logical work is the least), but none of this can be traced back in any direct way to Wittgenstein’s writing. All of his work, however, manifests Wittgenstein’s stress on con-

ceptual multiplicity and his distrust of simple answers and philosophical theses, and it shares Wittgenstein's aversion to superficial, careless, or pretentious writing (see WITTGENSTEIN).

Humanism

Von Wright also shares with Wittgenstein a sensitivity to the larger context of philosophy, whose present character he also tends to think of as "the darkness of this time." He has written numerous essays (mostly in Swedish or Finnish) on writers such as Spengler, Toynbee, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy and on topics including education, the state of the humanities, the image of science, the myth of progress, and the idea of revolution: essays aimed at clarifying the meaning of his life as a human being rather than as a professional philosopher. (See *The Tree of Knowledge*, 1993.)

He began as a believer in the "spirit of scientific rationality," which was inspired above all by post-Cartesian mathematics and physics, and which in turn inspired the philosophy of Kaila and the logical empiricists, the new logic, and analytic philosophy. He was never a believer in the idea that scientific rationality would result in inevitable progress – even his youthful "aesthetic humanism" was strongly affected by Spengler – but he was a believer in the ideal of philosophy as one of the exact sciences.

This attitude changed when he began teaching moral philosophy, and under the influence of Jaeger's *Paidea* he abandoned "aesthetic humanism" for an individualistic "ethical humanism," which recognized a practical rationality on a par with the rationality of the exact sciences. This was shattered by the effect the Vietnam war had on him, a war he protested in eloquent and effective ways and which forced him to think about the human condition in social and political terms. The result was the "social humanism" to which he remains committed and which he has expressed in powerful essays on the threat to human life of the very scientific rationality which inspired his early efforts in philosophy, essays which have made him Scandinavia's most prominent – if controversial – public intellectual.

His critical attitude toward the ideal of scientific rationality, above all for the major role it has played in creating social and technological conditions which both threaten the natural environment and inspire irrational and unjust ways to try to meet the threat, have also changed his conception of philosophy. He thinks of it, not as an exact science, but as critical reflection on the underlying assumptions of our thinking, judging, and acting – reflection which, since these assumptions are embedded in social institutions and traditions, must inevitably scrutinize the foundations of society (see "Intellectual Autobiography," 1989).

Although von Wright thinks of his humanist essays as parallel to rather than part of his philosophical work, they exhibit many of the same virtues. They are rich with illuminating insights, unexpected observations, and stimulating suggestions for further thought, and they are written in a style perfectly suited to their subject and to their author. His strictly philosophical work adds such further virtues as exact and intricate argument, systematic distinctions, and technical sophistication. These are the virtues prized by analytic philosophy, which von Wright has not abandoned, in spite of rejecting scientific rationality as the ideal of philosophy and being skeptical about its role as an ideal for any inquiry. What he regards as the chief virtue of philosophy has been

best expressed in the epigram to his autobiography, which is from Melville's *Moby Dick*: "All deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea."

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