

Paradigm Case Arguments

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I

The paradigm case argument is a widely employed, yet controversial, weapon in the armory of contemporary analytical philosophers. It has been hailed as a philosophical panacea, resolving paradoxes from perception to ethics; and it has been scorned as both unsound and useless. I hope in this paper to help determine its proper use: I will try to show that it can be helpful, particularly at the initial stage of clearing up linguistic misunderstandings. But I must conclude that it is unequal to the more grandiose tasks assigned to it.

The paradigm case argument is most commonly employed to refute skeptical paradoxes that seem to contradict common sense. It consists essentially in an appeal to an ideal example of the application of the term—a paradigm case—which is cited to establish conclusively that the term has application. Since the meaning of the term is given by its use, the ordinary use *must* be correct; thus it cannot consistently be denied that any term so used has proper application. J. O. Urmson has discussed two examples in which, he says, the paradigm case argument can be used.¹ Suppose someone denied that there are any red objects. He could be shown to be mistaken simply by pointing out that the word “red” is used in ordinary English to describe certain objects; since this is its ordinary use, from which the term takes its meaning, this use cannot be incorrect. And so there are red objects.

A more interesting case occurs in Susan Stebbing’s *Philosophy and the Physicists*.² Sir Arthur Eddington had claimed, in his book *The Nature of the Physical World*, that ordinary material objects are not really solid, since atomic physics tells us that there are spaces between the particles that make up the atom.³ Stebbing retorts that it is surely wrong to say there are no solid objects, for the meaning of the word “solid” is shown by its use in describing such things as desks and rocks. Eddington apparently took “solid” to mean something like, “spatially continuous, without interstices”; but if we observe the ordinary speaker of English we will soon see that he is untroubled by possible spaces within the atoms of the furniture around him.

But the paradigm case argument has also been employed for more controversial philosophical purposes. Paul Edwards, for example, has used it (though without the present label) to try to solve the traditional problem of induction.⁴ Critics of induction, he notes, charge that inductive

evidence provides no reason to expect the future to resemble the past. This is due to the assertion, notorious since Hume, that whatever evidence may be introduced is necessarily evidence about the past; so the question whether the future will resemble the past in the relevant respects is begged at the outset. But to argue thus is to make a mistake about language, Edwards responds. For inductive reasons are paradigm cases of good reasons of a certain sort: to say that one has no *reason* to expect the person who jumps off the Empire State Building to fall to his death is to employ the word “reason” in a quixotic, and therefore incorrect, sense. Induction can be defended against its critics’ charges if only we recognize that it cannot be incorrect to call inductive reasons “reasons,” since that is what they are called in the ordinary use of language.

A final example is the attempt by Antony Flew to use the paradigm case argument to resolve the ancient problem of free will.⁵ The advance of science has tended to provide ever more ammunition to those who claim that, like everything else in the macroscopic universe, human choice is the product of causal factors which are ultimately outside the agent’s control. Therefore, they have argued, the will is not free. But Flew argues that the term “free will” is learned or explained only by reference to such acts as joining the army or getting married in the absence of outside compulsion. It may be true that such decisions have causal antecedents in the agent’s character and personality; but to deny this is not the point of describing the act as free. It is rather to exclude such external compulsions as the draft or a shotgun wedding. Since in ordinary language we call such acts “free,” it is absurd to deny that they are free.

II

Of course, critics of the paradigm case argument have not been slow to decry what they see as its weaknesses. It seems to provide an all-too-easy method of resolving philosophical problems wholesale, regardless of the merits of the individual cases. Indeed, it has seemed to some to be another example of what they take as the pernicious tendency of ordinary language philosophy toward a complacent conservatism, in which whatever is said by the man in the street is beyond philosophical reproach. Norman Malcolm, in one of the earliest specific discussions of the paradigm case argument (though he does not use this term) considers one form of this objection.⁶ Would the paradigm case argument imply that there must be ghosts, since the term “ghost” has—or at least had—an ordinary use? If so, clearly something has gone amiss. But no, replies Malcolm; the paradigm case argument is only applicable to those terms which can be learned or taught *solely* by reference to actual examples. “Ghost” is not such a term:

it might be explained descriptively, by stating verbal criteria for its application. For example, the definition might be "an insubstantial, translucent human figure resembling in appearance a person now dead." And therefore the fact that "ghost" has an ordinary use does not establish that there are ghosts; those who use the term could have learned it in this way, and not by reference to actual ghosts.

John Passmore, however, points out a major weakness in Malcolm's effort to delimit the application of the paradigm case argument: it just is not the case that the philosophically interesting terms are defined only ostensively.⁷ For example, Passmore considers the term "miracle." In a society which unquestioningly accepts the occurrence of miracles, the ordinary speaker would suppose that he could teach the use of the term *both* by reference to actual miracles, *and* by explaining its definition—perhaps "an event in principle explicable only as the act of a supernatural agent." Such a user of the term "miracle" will learn its use by being shown examples of unexpective recoveries from serious illnesses, etc., and will take them to be paradigms of miracles. The philosophically interesting cases are all like this, says Passmore: they are terms which could be learned by verbal definition as well as by ostension. So Malcolm has failed to distinguish what the paradigm case argument can prove from what it cannot. Passmore concludes that the paradigm case argument is of little use: it can only remind us that there may be a point to the skeptic's challenge that is more significant than the simple-minded interpretation of it might suggest.

Urmson criticizes certain other applications of the paradigm case argument, in particular the attempt to use it to establish the validity of inductive and ethical reasoning.⁸ Philosophers like Edwards have argued that these forms of reasoning must be valid within their own spheres, since there are paradigm cases of inductive or ethical reasoning which are regarded as justified reasoning; and so it is senseless to ask whether ethical or inductive reasoning is ever valid. But the paradigm case argument is misleading here, thinks Urmson; for to call an argument valid is not merely to classify it, but also to appraise it. And from the fact that we do, in fact, favorably appraise certain argument forms as valid it clearly does not follow that we *should* so appraise them. What the paradigm case argument does is to clarify the real nature of the challenge: the real question is, "Are the criteria of validity used in inductive (or ethical) reasoning the best ones to use?" The paradigm case argument cannot answer this question, Urmson contends; it can only identify it.

Along the same lines, Tziporah Kasachkoff has argued that, although the paradigm case argument has no ontological implications, it nonetheless has a use.⁹ Like Malcolm and Urmson, she sees the function of the paradigm case argument as directing attention to the fact that the arguments in question are essentially linguistic. When the metaphysician denies that there is free will, for example, he may think that he is making an empirical claim. The paradigm case argument can show that he is not; he is making a linguistic recommendation that we should cease to use the expression "free will" to describe human acts. Once this point is grasped it will be clear that the metaphysician is urging a departure from ordinary language, and that the onus is on him to show why. The paradigm case argument cannot show whether the change is justified; but it can show that this is the issue.

This use of the paradigm case argument is not insignificant. As Malcolm notes, philosophers have often thought they were arguing for empirical or conceptual claims when in fact they were making disguised linguistic recommendations. Recommendations to change language may be important, and they may be supported by cogent reasons—particularly if the ordinary use incorporated inconsistent criteria, or is based on erroneous factual beliefs. And it is characteristic of the more interesting paradoxes that the criteria the skeptic wishes to employ are tempting just because they seem to be the ones we ordinarily use; they may even be those the ordinary man would cite if asked. It is entirely likely, I think, that many people would define "solid" as "spatially continuous without interstices, or "free act" as "one which is not causally determined." Skeptical paradoxes can bring to light problems in ordinary language; and the paradigm case argument can identify these paradoxes as the linguistic recommendations they really are. Malcolm, Urmson, Passmore and Kasachkoff have seen this use of the argument, and I think they are correct. But, as we have seen, far more ambitious claims have been made for this form of argument.

III

None of the discussions mentioned above seems quite to have identified the source of difficulty in the argument. Let us look again at some of the uses to which the paradigm case argument has been put. It has been thought to show: a) that there really are red things; b) that there are solid objects; c) that inductive reasoning is good reasoning; d) that we sometimes act freely; and e) (as an intended *reductio ad absurdum*) that there are ghosts and miracles. It is clear that the success of the argument varies widely with these cases. The paradigm case argument seems quite

adequate to show that there are red things, and wholly insufficient to show that there are ghosts or miracles. What is the difference?

The difference lies in the point made by Passmore, that most terms in ordinary language are taught by both paradigm cases and descriptive criteria. The ordinary speaker may learn that a miracle is a contravention of natural law by a supernatural agent, or he may have examples of supposed miracles pointed out to him. I think it is the presence or absence of these verbal criteria that determines the success or failure of the paradigm case argument.

Where the use of the term is taught only by ostension, the paradigm cases stand alone: when it is argued that there must be red things, since the term has a use, *nothing further follows from the fact that "red" is being correctly used*. Since there are no additional criteria for the use of "red," no inferences are licensed about the object correctly called red. We may call these "pure" paradigm cases, since no verbal criteria are involved. It is different with the term "miracle," which would be taught by verbal criteria as well. Children will be shown examples of unexplained escape from danger, as cases of miracles. But they will also be told that a miracle is a contravention of natural law. And so *they will think that calling the event a miracle warrants the inference that it was a contravention of natural law*. We may call these "mixed" paradigm cases, since they are verbal criteria present also. Clearly it is such further inferences that make the paradigm case argument less convincing about miracles than red objects. In the case of "red" the absence of verbal criteria means that no implications follow the correct use of the term; in the case of "miracle" the presence of verbal criteria means that there are further implications, and we may be unwilling to accept them.

The same point can be made about using the paradigm case argument on induction. As we have seen, Edwards defends induction by pointing to cases where inductive reasoning would be accepted as reasonable. The skeptic denies that this is a *justification* of induction, to make the following point: to call inductive reasoning "justified" is to say that this reasoning process fulfills some criteria. Obviously the criterion the skeptic has in mind is that a justified reasoning process will provide true conclusions if the premisses are true. Since, as everyone knows, inductive reasoning based on true premisses may yield false conclusions, the criterion is not fulfilled. That is, the verbal criterion would license the inference that, in a case of induction properly called "valid," true premisses will yield true conclusions. Since this inference is unwarranted, the skeptic refuses to call the reasoning valid.

This will also clarify Flew's use of the paradigm case argument on free will. So long as Flew merely wishes to show that the ordinary use of "free will" must be the correct use, he is on firm ground. But the skeptic wishes to insist that there is, or should be, a verbal criterion as well: a free act cannot be causally determined. (As we saw, this is not an arbitrary stipulation: philosophy students often use this criterion; when they are shown that some evidence suggests that our choices are caused, they promptly conclude that we are not free.) Now, if this verbal criterion is imposed on the use of the word "free," it follows that a free act must be causally undetermined. Since the skeptic refuses to accept this consequence, he denies that the act is free.

In general, then, the paradigm case argument is successful with terms whose use is *not* governed by verbal criteria, and is *not* successful with terms whose use is so governed. This is because where verbal criteria are absent, no controversial conclusions are implied by the correct use of the term. But where verbal criteria are present, conclusions follow that cannot be established by purely linguistic considerations such as the paradigm case argument. No one, I hope, would be tempted to argue that there really are ghosts because some people use the word; but in more difficult cases like induction it has sometimes been thought that the paradigm case argument can solve problems that have plagued philosophers for millennia. But if the argument is conclusive only in those cases where verbal criteria are absent, it follows that it is conclusive only in those cases where applying a term licenses no inferences whatever. In other words, the more conclusively the paradigm case argument can prove a point, the less significant that point must be. Unfortunately, it seems, we will have to do our own philosophical work after all.

Footnotes

1. J. O. Urmson, "Some Questions Concerning Validity," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 1953; repr. *Essays in Conceptual Analysis*, ed. Antony Flew (New York: MacMillan, 1956).
2. Susan Stebbing, *Philosophy and the Physicists* (New York: Penguin, 1944).
3. Arthur Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928).
4. Paul Edwards, "Bertrand Russell's Doubts About Induction," *Mind*, 1949; repr. *Logic and Language: First Series*, ed. Antony Flew (Oxford: Blackwell, 1951).
5. Antony Flew, "Philosophy and Language," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 1955; repr. *Essays in Conceptual Analysis*, ed. Antony Flew (New York: MacMillan, 1956).
6. Norman Malcolm, "Moore and Ordinary Language," in *Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (New York: Tudor 1952).
7. John Passmore, *Philosophical Reasoning* (London: Duckworth, 1961), Ch. 6.

8. Urmson, *op. cit.*

9. Tziporah Kasachkoff, "Ontological Implications of the Paradigm Case Argument," *Philosophical Studies* (Maynooth, Ireland) v. 18 (1968).

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