

METAPHYSICS, MATHEMATICS,
AND MEANING

Metaphysics,
Mathematics, and
Meaning

Philosophical Papers I

NATHAN SALMON

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These volumes are lovingly dedicated to my daughter,
Simone Becca Salmon,
the loveliest person it has been my honor to know.

Preface

A Father's Message

The earliest philosophical thought I distinctly remember having was when I was a boy of around six. My mother (your grandmother) and her sister, Auntie Rae, were driving my cousins, my sister, and me to synagogue on the high holy day of Yom Kippur. My mother explained to the four of us sitting unsecured in the back seat (there were no car seat belts then) that God can do anything. She had taught me of God's omnipotence earlier. "Really absolutely *anything*?" I wondered. It was a challenge I could not resist: to come up with something that even He—the Big Guy in the Sky—can't do. I had already given the matter some thought, and had what I believed was a solution. The time had come for me to take a stand. I said triumphantly, "God can't stop time."

I meant that He cannot stop the passage of time. I explained that even though God might stop all motion—freezing everything and everyone dead in its tracks—time would still be passing for Him, and therefore, time would still be passing. I thought also that even if God then went into hibernation, freezing even Himself in thought as well as action, time would still be passing. However, I judged this further argument was excessively subtle, so I kept it to myself. My father had dismissed my argument, insisting that God can even stop time. His tone implied that my attempt to find something God cannot do was heretical and therefore immoral. But my aunt's reaction was completely different. She turned to my mother and said, "That's amazing! That's *deep*!" Then she turned to me and said, "God can't stop time. That's very good, Nathan! Wow."

The incident impressed upon me several things. My father's reaction had made me feel depressed, though I knew even at that age that it was not an intellectually worthy rebuttal. My aunt's reaction made me feel vindicated. I was certain that any belief, even a religious belief, is rationally legitimate only if it can be subjected to critical assessment and only if it can withstand that sort of scrutiny. I also learned that theists typically do not share this attitude, at least not when it comes to their own religious beliefs. I also discovered that human beings (including myself) display a curious tendency to believe something not because they have good reason to think it true but because they need it to be true. I learned that those irrational beliefs are often among the beliefs that a person holds most strongly. Some go so far as to demand that others share those beliefs—as if one's beliefs are a matter of voluntary choice. And for the first time that I can remember, I felt that maybe my mind was capable of some substantial depth.

Later experiences seemed to confirm that theists resist all attempts to subject their faith to critical evaluation. It was not until I went to college that I encountered religious people who seemed to welcome the challenge of rational criticism. However, it still seemed to me that even those few philosophical theists are unwilling, maybe

even unable, to look at religious belief in a completely detached and unbiased way. Today I religiously avoid discussing religious matters with religious people. Besides, I have become so thoroughly convinced that there are no gods that I find the issue completely uninteresting. Instead, I turned my attention to contemporary academic issues that are too abstract for anyone to take very personally.

I do philosophy. I investigate issues from a philosophical point of view, and try to achieve a deeper understanding using philosophical methods. My primary tool is reason, my primary criterion for success truth.

There will always be those who condemn reason as somehow excessively confining. There will also be those who hold that truth is over-rated, that it is somehow subjective, or even nonexistent, and that therefore it should not be the principal aim of rational inquiry. These people typically replace reason or truth with some favored practical, political, or social agenda, implicitly suggesting that the reasoned search for truth is immoral. Often, they misleadingly apply the word 'true' to any proposition that promotes or supports their substitute for genuine truth. These people are not merely mistaken; naturally understood, their stance is inconsistent. Worse, they devalue humanity's greatest intellectual achievements. Indeed they soil the noblest intellectual pursuit of which humanity is capable. Their stance is also dangerous. It is advisable to keep those who place little or no value on genuine reason and truth at a safe distance, at least intellectually (even though they frequently occupy positions of power and status). It is better to seek truth and miss than to aim elsewhere and hit the bull's eye. There is no sin in having erroneous beliefs, provided one endeavors not to.

My principal area is the philosophy of language. What is the meaning or content of a sentence—what is that which the sentence *says*, and which someone may believe or disbelieve? And how do the meanings of the individual words contribute toward forming the meaning of the sentence? I defend the *theory of direct reference*. According to direct-reference theory, the content of a name like 'Simone Salmon' is simply the person it stands for. This is *direct* reference because the name means directly what it stands for, rather than meaning some third entity that intervenes between the name and its bearer.

Direct-reference theory is saddled with serious philosophical problems. One set of problems concerns identifications. If direct-reference theory is correct, then a statement like 'Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens' simply says about Mark Twain that he is himself. So the sentence would mean the same thing as 'Mark Twain is Mark Twain.' But these two sentences do not appear to be synonymous. Everyone knows the information contained in the second sentence, but some people evidently don't know the information contained in the first: that Mark Twain and Samuel Clemens are one and the very same. This problem is called "Frege's puzzle," after the great philosopher who first used it to argue against direct reference. Frege held instead that the meaning of a word or expression is a concept of the thing referred to. Although both names stand for the same person, the name 'Mark Twain' means or expresses one concept, the name 'Samuel Clemens' another. I have become known for my defense of direct-reference theory against Frege's puzzle.

The other set of problems with direct-reference theory concerns names for individuals that do not exist. If the content of a name is just the thing for which it

stands, as direct-reference theory holds, then a name like 'Harry Potter' should mean nothing at all, since it stands for a completely fictional character. If the name means nothing at all, then the sentences that make up the Harry Potter stories should be meaningless. But they are clearly meaningful. They make some sense, we understand them, and they entertain.

I have defended direct-reference theory against this problem. I argue that although Harry Potter is fictional, he is also every bit as real as you or me. What distinguishes a fictional character like Harry Potter is that he is not a real *person*. That is, Harry Potter is not actually a person. He is only a fictional person. A fictional person is a real *thing*, although not a real person. Harry Potter is an object—a real object—created by author J. K. Rowling. He is every bit as real as the novels themselves. In fact, he is a component part of those novels.

This sort of consideration does not lay the problem to rest finally. One can devise names that, unlike names from fiction, really do stand for nothing at all. The problem thus has a good deal of force and resilience. I have done much to bring the remaining problem into sharp focus, to pave the way for a full defense of direct reference.

My defense of direct reference points back to a theological theme. God, it turns out, is every bit as real as you or me. On the other hand, as an atheist I hold that God is also no more real than Harry Potter. God is depicted in modern mythology as an omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent, and divinely perfect being. In reality, He is an entirely mythical object, no more capable of real thought, action, intelligence, or even consciousness than any purely fictional character.

Those who are offended by this simple observation ought to look inside themselves and dispassionately ask "Why?". Most will not. Let us hope some will.

Acknowledgments

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