



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

ANALYSIS

On Brute Facts

Author(s): G. E. M. Anscombe

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Analysis*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Jan., 1958), pp. 69-72

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#) on behalf of [The Analysis Committee](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3326788>

Accessed: 16/02/2012 05:48

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Oxford University Press and *The Analysis Committee* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Analysis*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

would indeed be surprising and would constitute a weighty, but not a decisive argument. It would not be decisive, because the philosophically important issue is concerned with the nature and order of the activities involved, not with the allocation of English words to these activities.

University of Leicester.

ON BRUTE FACTS

By G. E. M. ANSCOMBE

FOLLOWING Hume I might say to my grocer: "Truth consists in agreement either to relations of ideas, as that twenty shillings make a pound, or to matters of fact, as that you have delivered me a quarter of potatoes; from this you can see that the term does not apply to such a proposition as that I owe you so much for the potatoes. You really must not jump from an 'is'—as, that it really is the case that I asked for the potatoes and that you delivered them and sent me a bill—to an 'owes'".

Does my owing the grocer in this case consist in any facts beyond the ones mentioned? No. Someone may want to say: it consists in these facts in the context of our institutions. This is correct in a way. But we must be careful, so to speak, to bracket that analysis correctly. That is, we must say, not: It consists in these-facts-holding-in-the-context-of-our-institutions, but: It consists in these facts—in the context of our institutions, or: In the context of our institutions it consists in these facts. For the statement that I owe the grocer does not contain a description of our institutions, any more than the statement that I gave someone a shilling contains a description of the institution of money and of the currency of this country. On the other hand, it requires these or very similar institutions as background in order so much as to be the *kind* of statement that it is.

Given this background, these facts do not necessarily amount to my owing the grocer such-and-such a sum. For the transaction might have been arranged as part of an amateur film production. Then perhaps I have said to the grocer "Send so many potatoes" and he has sent them, and he has sent a bill—but the whole procedure was not a real sale but a piece of acting;

even though it so happens that I then eat the potatoes (not as part of the film): for perhaps the grocer has said I can keep them; or has said nothing but doesn't care, and the question never comes up. Thus the fact that something is done in a society with certain institutions, in the context of which it ordinarily amounts to such-and-such a transaction, is not absolute proof that such-and-such a transaction has taken place.

Is it *intention* that makes the difference? Not if we think of intention as purely interior. What is true is this: what ordinarily amounts to such-and-such a transaction *is* such-and-such a transaction, unless a special context gives it a different character. But we should not include among special contexts the circumstance that I am suddenly deprived of all my goods and put in prison (through no fault of my own, if you like)—so that I can't pay the grocer. For in those circumstances it is still true to say that I owe him money. Nor is there ordinarily any need to look about for a special context so as to make sure there is none that makes a radical difference. Ordinarily there is not; or if there is it usually comes very readily to light, though not always: which is why it is true to say that deception is always possible. But it is not theoretically possible to make provision in advance for the exception of extraordinary cases; for one can theoretically always suppose a further special context for each special context, which puts *it* in a new light.

Let us return to the move of saying: "Owing the grocer consists in these facts, in the context of our institutions". We ought to notice that exactly the same holds for the facts themselves as we described them. A set of events is the ordering and supplying of potatoes, and something is a bill, only in the context of our institutions.

Now if my owing the grocer on this occasion does not consist in any facts beyond the facts mentioned, it seems that we must say one of two things. Either (*a*) to say I owe the grocer is nothing but to say that *some such* facts hold, or (*b*) to say I owe the grocer adds something non-factual to the statement that some such facts hold.

But of course, if this is a valid point, it holds equally for the description of a set of events as: the grocer's supplying me with potatoes. And we should not wish to say either of these things about that.

The grocer supplies me with a quarter of potatoes: that is to say, he (1) brings that amount of potatoes to my house and (2) leaves them there. But not any action of taking a lot of

potatoes to my house and leaving them there would be *supplying* me with them. If for example, by the grocer's own arrangement, someone else, who had nothing to do with me, came and took them away soon afterwards, the grocer could not be said to have supplied me.—*When*, one might ask, did he supply me? Obviously, when he left the potatoes; it would be absurd to add “and also when he did *not* send to take them away again”.

There can be no such thing as an exhaustive description of *all* the circumstances which theoretically could impair the description of an action of leaving a quarter of potatoes in my house as “supplying me with a quarter of potatoes”. If there were such an exhaustive description, one could say that “supplying me with a quarter of potatoes” *means* leaving them at my house, together with the absence of any of those circumstances. As things are, we could only say “It means leaving them . . . together with the absence of any of the circumstances which would impair the description of that action as an action of supplying me with potatoes”; which is hardly an explanation. But I can know perfectly well that the grocer has supplied me with potatoes; asked what this consisted in, I say there was nothing to it but that I had ordered them and he brought them to my house.

Every description presupposes a context of normal procedure, but that context is not even implicitly described by the description. Exceptional circumstances could always make a difference, but they do not come into consideration without reason.

As compared with supplying me with a quarter of potatoes we might call carting a quarter of potatoes to my house and leaving them there a “brute fact”. But as compared with the fact that I owe the grocer such-and-such a sum of money, that he supplied me with a quarter of potatoes is itself a brute fact. In relation to many descriptions of events or states of affairs which are asserted to hold, we can ask what the “brute facts” were; and this will mean the facts which held, and in virtue of which, in a proper context, such-and-such a description is true or false, and which are more “brute” than the alleged fact answering to that description. I will not ask here whether there are any facts that are, so to speak, “brute” in comparison with leaving a quarter of potatoes at my house. On the other hand, one could think of facts in relation to which my owing the grocer such-and-such a sum of money is “brute”—e.g. the fact that I am solvent.

We can now state some of the relations which at least sometimes hold between a description, say A , and descriptions, say $xy\zeta$, of facts which are brute in relation to the fact described by A .

(1) There is a *range* of sets of such descriptions $xy\zeta$ such that some set of the range must be true if the description A is to be true. But the range can only ever be roughly indicated, and the way to indicate it is by giving a few diverse examples.

(2) The existence of the description A in the language in which it occurs presupposes a context, which we will call "the institution behind A "; this context may or may not be presupposed to elements in the descriptions $xy\zeta$. For example, the institution of buying and selling is presupposed to the description "sending a bill", as it is to "being owed for goods received", but not to the description "supplying potatoes".

(3) A is not a description of the institution behind A .

(4) If some set holds out of the range of sets of descriptions some of which must hold if A is to hold, and if the institution behind A exists, then "in normal circumstances" A holds. The meaning of "in normal circumstances" can only be indicated roughly, by giving examples of exceptional circumstances in which A would not hold.

(5) To assert the truth of A is not to assert that the circumstances were "normal"; but if one is asked to justify A , the truth of the description $xy\zeta$ is in normal circumstances an adequate justification: A is not verified by any further facts.

(6) If A entails some other description B , then $xy\zeta$ cannot generally be said to entail B , but $xy\zeta$ together with normality of circumstances relatively to such descriptions as A can be said to entail B . For example: "He supplied me with potatoes" entails "The potatoes came into my possession". Further, "He had the potatoes brought to my house and left there" is in normal circumstances an adequate justification for saying "He supplied me with potatoes"; asked what his action of supplying me with potatoes consisted in, one would normally have no further facts to mention. (One *cannot* mention all the things that were *not* the case, which would have made a difference if they had been.) But "He had potatoes carted to my house and left there" does *not* entail "The potatoes came into my possession". On the other hand "He had potatoes carted to my house and left there and the circumstances were just the normal circumstances as far as concerns being supplied with goods" does entail "The potatoes came into my possession".

University of Oxford.