

LOGIC, LANGUAGE AND METAPHYSICS

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I

Many philosophers have been suspicious of language, considering it a hindrance rather than an aid in philosophical investigation. But Russell and Wittgenstein departed from this tradition by asserting that a careful study of language may lead to positive metaphysical conclusions. Wittgenstein had written in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that in order for a given sentence to assert a particular fact, the sentence must have a logical structure which has something in common with the ontological structure of the fact. Hence on the not unreasonable assumption that sentences are easier to investigate than the facts they assert, the royal road to metaphysical knowledge consists in investigating the structure of sentences. Russell was aware of the pitfalls that beset this pathway, i.e. "the fallacy of verbalism... that consists in mistaking the properties of words for the properties of things" ⁽¹⁾. Language has many "accidental" features: the same fact may be asserted by several sentences with widely different structures. Russell concluded therefore that "common language is not sufficiently logical... we must first construct an artificial logical language before we can properly investigate our problem" ⁽²⁾. Yet the nature of such an "ideal" language has never been completely specified; perhaps it could only be explained by actually constructing such a logically perfect language. Russell's "logical" language as developed in *Principia Mathematica* was indeed an improvement over ordinary language in that it has certain distinctions introduced right into the symbolism itself. In it, for example, we note immediately

⁽¹⁾ B. RUSSELL, "Vagueness", *Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy*, I (1923), p. 85.

⁽²⁾ B. RUSSELL, *Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, p. 415.

that there is no misleading resemblance in grammatical form between the notion of "existence" on the one hand, and ordinary properties on the other. However, the question remains whether we can validly infer the structure of facts from the structure of sentences asserting these facts. The steps that logicians have taken in the direction of an "ideal" language have been achieved on the basis of previous philosophical insight. Puzzles and problems cannot be distinguished except on the foundation of a given metaphysics. Zeno's paradox of the arrow, for example, becomes a platitude within the framework of Russell's cinematographic metaphysics. But in a metaphysics of substance the matter is otherwise. A metaphysics must therefore be chosen or constructed prior to the construction of an ideal language. There is actually no good reason why we should expect language to correspond to or "resemble" the world anymore closely than a telescope does the planet which it brings to the astronomer's attention.

The idea that knowledge forms an ordered, hierarchical system is not a new one; it was in fact anticipated by the theory of self-evidence put forward by Aristotle in the *Posterior Analytics* and assumed by Descartes in his pursuit of an indubitable starting point for the reconstruction of his beliefs. The inspiration behind the recurrences of this theory has in each case been mathematical and logical. The traditional alternative to the doctrine of foundations is the coherence theory which argues that the elements of our knowledge do not stand in any sort of linear dependence on a set of self-evident truths about the given, but hang together rather, in a systematic mutual corroboration. Popper, for instance, does not deny that there are basic statements, but contends that their basicness is not absolute but relative. There are no statements for which further evidence cannot be acquired, however no further evidence need be sought for those which are not disputed by anyone⁽³⁾. Goodman has likewise argued that a statement is basic only in relation to a particular, freely chosen way of systematizing the set to which

(3) J. GRUENFELD, "Science and Philosophy in Popper", *Sciences Ecclésiastiques*, Montréal, September 1967.

it belongs. And Austin actually maintained that the doctrine of foundations is altogether misconceived⁽⁴⁾. The traditional form of the doctrine of foundations holds that there must be some intuitive beliefs if any beliefs are to be justified at all. But empiricist philosophers are as a rule uncomfortable at the mention of intuition which they identify with some perhaps mystical, and at any rate uncheckable alternative to observation. Still, statements which are both ostensive and intuitive are the atomic propositions of Russell's logical atomism, the elementary propositions of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, and the protocol propositions of the Vienna Circle. Carnap and Neurath maintained that science and therefore ordinary common sense, was a public, intersubjective affair and could not be based on private experience that individuals had no way of communicating to each other. However, this identification of science and of common sense is by no means unproblematic. Popper points out⁽⁵⁾ that theories precede observation and that there is no such thing as pure observation. We always observe under the guidance of some hypothesis which directs our attention by telling us what to look for. Theories may be suggested by facts to some extent, but an indispensable part is played in theoretical conjecture by the background of knowledge already achieved. The acceptance of basic statements is a matter of convention and thus dogmatic, but not viciously so since the convention can be abandoned if it comes into conflict with some other convention. Popper thus maintains that the structure of our knowledge has foundations, but denies that these are absolutely solid and incorrigible. Whatever we know of the external world is in various degrees subject to doubt. But some things are so evident that it makes no sense to say that we may doubt them. If we did not know sometimes some such truths, we would not understand what it means to doubt some others. The search of some superior kind of certainty is futile.

(4) Cf. Anthony QUINTON, "The Foundation of Knowledge", in Bernard WILLIAMS and Alan MONTEFIORE, *British Analytical Philosophy*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1967, pp. 55-57.

(5) *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, and *Conjectures and Refutations*, ch. 5.

Generally, ontology has been thought to be the theory or study of the nature of being — or, to use more modern terminology, the study of what kinds of entities are basic. But to find what ontological position we are committed to requires a theory of reference. The sentence is always the result of a narrow selection of a complex fact. It is remarkable that the simpler of theories is generally regarded not only as the more desirable but also as the more probable. "Simplicity" is not easy to define, but it may be expected to be relative to the texture of a conceptual scheme⁽⁶⁾. Corresponding observations apply to the maxims of the uniformity of nature according to which, vaguely speaking, things similar in some aspects tend to prove similar in others. Such belief in the simplicity and hence uniformity of nature can be partly accounted for by wishful thinking and the nature of our perceptual mechanism. There is a subjective selectivity that makes us tend to see the simple and miss the complex. But a "fact" is not a simple entity, it is always a complex of objects. To state something as a fact is to state it authoritatively, to vouch for it, or to state it without reservations. A fact is not a sort of thing, but it is that which is stated by a true factual statement. "Simplicity" is thus vague. Theories are more or less simple, they are simple only relatively to another given vocabulary or conceptual apparatus. Yet it is by reference to the common sense bodies that the very notions of reality and evidence are acquired. Epistemology is not somehow logically prior to science; it is part rather of the overall scientific enterprise which Neurath has likened to that of rebuilding a ship while staying afloat in it. It is often taken for granted that everything customarily called logic is a purely neutral machinery that can be used without ontological implications in any constructional system. But this neutrality is preserved only so long as the machinery is uninterpreted. If we use variables that we construe as having entities of any given kind as values, we acknowledge that there are such entities. Nominalism consists in a refusal to

⁽⁶⁾ W. V. QUINE, *The Ways of Paradox*, Random House, New York, 1966, p. 242.

⁽⁷⁾ Nelson GOODMAN, *The Structure of Appearance*, Bobbs-Merrill Co. Indianapolis, New York, Kansas City, 1966, p. 34.

countenance any entities other than individuals, but the decision to recognize nothing but individuals does not of itself specify what may be taken as an individual. Indeed, nothing has intrinsic or absolute status as an individual or a class. Whether a system recognizes classes as well as individuals depends upon how it makes up entities out of others. An individual need not be organized or uniform, continuous or need not have regular boundaries. But if anything can be an "individual", this notion is empty. Ordinarily the choice has to be made on the ground of practical and technical convenience⁽⁸⁾. To adopt a term as primitive is to introduce it into the system without defining it. But no term is absolutely undefinable; terms adopted as primitives of a given system are readily definable in some other system. However, once the problem is accepted for investigation, the question of the merits of such primitives as compared with others is no longer the point, for to take other primitives would be to deal with a different problem. A demand for definitions of certain predicates is usually a demand for definitions in terms of primitives of a certain kind, as becomes evident when otherwise satisfactory definitions are rejected as trivial or irrelevant.

As is well known, the theory of simples led to paradoxes. An antinomy produces a self-contradiction by accepted ways of reasoning; it establishes that some tacit and trusted pattern of reasoning must be made explicit and henceforward be avoided or revised⁽⁹⁾. Russell's paradox is a genuine antinomy because the principle of class existence that it compels us to give up is so fundamental. Classes are appealed to in most branches of mathematics, and increasingly so as passages of mathematical reasoning are made more explicit. Clarity is gained in that for classes we have a definite idea of sameness and difference; it is a question simply of their having the same or different members. The less a science is advanced, the more its terminology tends to rest on an uncritical assumption of mutual understanding. What was once regarded as theory about the world becomes reconstructed as a convention of language. But whatever our dif-

⁽⁸⁾ GOODMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

⁽⁹⁾ QUINE, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

ficulties over the relevant distinctions, it must be conceded that logic and mathematics do seem qualitatively different from the rest of science. The metaphysician argues that science presupposes metaphysical principles, or raises metaphysical problems, and that the scientist should therefore show due concern. The positivist's answer consists in showing in detail how people might speak a language quite adequate for all our science but, unlike our language, incapable of expressing the alleged metaphysical issues. However, being a new invention, the language has to be explained, and the explanation proceeds by formation and transformation rules which hold by arbitrary fiat ⁽¹⁰⁾. Usually, if a philosopher completely rejects a rival system as irrelevant or "meaningless", the chances are that he is playing a different language-game. One can doubt any particular judgment or assertion, but one cannot doubt all possible judgments or assertions because significant doubts always rest upon something that we accept. Ontology thus becomes a collection of an indeterminately large number of commonplaces or truisms which have a certain use and point when they are counterposed to absurdities ⁽¹¹⁾. The philosopher cannot revise the fundamental conceptual scheme without having some conceptual scheme no less in need of philosophical scrutiny.

The linguistic material is an interlocked system which is tied here and there to experience; it is not a society of separately established terms, each with its separate empirical definition. It is the system as a whole that is keyed to experience. But since experience is constantly reminding us that it is over the macroscopic objects that there is least semantical misunderstanding between speakers, it is naturally to tables and sheep and the like that we keep returning when there is trouble about a new concept. Our selective awareness is a function of present purposes and past conceptualizations. We do not break with the past, no do we attain to standards of evidence and reality different in kind from the vague standards of children and laymen. What ought to be remembered, however, is that to ask

⁽¹⁰⁾ QUINE, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

⁽¹¹⁾ Sidney HOOK, *The Quest for Being*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1961, p. 170.

about the reality of the external world is to make a logical point, the point namely, that all contingent statements can legitimately be doubted. We are so overwhelmingly impressed by the initial phase of our education that we continue to think of language generally as a secondary or superimposed apparatus for talking about real things. We tend not to appreciate that most of the things and most of the supposed traits of the so-called world, are learned through language. Thus the choice between phenomenological and physical elements as basic units reflects an underlying philosophical attitude. However, systems of different types may be regarded as answering different problems. In the end we may find that particularistic and realistic systems are about equally reasonable and that each has certain advantages and disadvantages. It is pointless to ask which sort of unit comes first; order has always to be evaluated with respect to some purpose.

II

The laws of logic, according to Frege, apply only to precise concepts, not to vague concepts, and in particular the principle of mathematical induction breaks down when applied to vague concepts. Schlick likewise claimed that "the dividing line between logical possibility and impossibility of verification is absolutely sharp and distinct; there is no gradual transition between meaning and nonsense" ⁽¹²⁾. But actually many statements lie on the borderline between meaning and nonsense. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, in particular, was a critique of language, which by implication was specifically a critique of traditional philosophy. It was designed to show that many of the questions of traditional philosophy are unanswerable because they transgress the limits of language, so that neither they nor their answers have any meaning. For Wittgenstein the boundary was fixed, not by the possibility of experience (as for Kant), but by the possibility of meaningful language. However, the development

⁽¹²⁾ *Meaning and Verification*, p. 351.

of linguistic philosophy has essentially been one of questioning this thesis, and in particular the doctrine that language is a kind of mirror of reality. In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein no longer expected systematic results because he had abandoned his belief in a single logical structure underlying the variety of language. What we find instead are techniques whose application is not precisely prescribed. Though he puts great weight on the connection between meaning and use, he never formulated a precise theory about it. Meaningless language, he thought, was language that had somehow become disengaged from its use, and was running idle. But he did not offer any general principle for discovering when this had happened.

Nevertheless, it was Wittgenstein who had first responded to the new mathematical logic produced by Frege, Whitehead and Russell. This not only changed our conception of the nature of mathematics and logic, but promises (or treatens) to change the world with the cybernetic devices of computers and automata whose design and construction is made possible by the new mathematical logic. In Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* all logic and all philosophy are inquiries into what makes it significant or nonsensical to say certain things. But there he came also to the frustrating conclusion that these principles of arrangement baffle significant statement. We have no privileged position from which we can get "outside" of language and neutrally view language and reality. Isaiah Berlin has called attention to the proneness of philosophers to adopt as a paradigm one type of sentence-fact relation, and then deflate other sentences to sentences of the chosen sort, or alternatively inflate other facts to facts of the chosen sort. The order of words in a sentence, is a conventional order of presentation. A sentence does not "show" its meaning (as a picture does); to understand a statement we must first have learned the language in which it is made. The characteristic feature of a philosophical grammar "representing" reality is that it does *not* have a morphology and a syntax. This is why Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* finally culminates in the mystic ineffable. Every language, by being a language, must have accidental features, i.e. cannot be identical with philosophical grammar. No grammatical concepts seem to be *per se* indispensable

or universal. When we recognize the non-verbal setting in which the words are pronounced as significant, we face formidable difficulties in identifying, distinguishing, counting and classifying the symbols that interest us. We have no decision procedures for questions of philosophical grammar; there are no adequate criteria for deciding whether contextual situations are to be counted as the same or different. The hope of finding the essential grammar is as illusiory as that of finding the true coordinate system for the representation of space.

Austin therefore argued that one of the reasons why so many philosophical controversies are protracted and indecisive is that both sides have accepted an unrealistic terminology. Two philosophers who think they are disputing about a matter of substance are really using a term in two different ways. Premature theorists bend their idiom to suit their theory, but the distinctions made in one language need not be the same as those made in another. One does not discover distinctions which must be made, only distinctions which can be and are made. Too often philosophers use ordinary language in a rather deviant manner, while at the same time relying on the entailments and implications of nondeviant use⁽¹³⁾. Hence there are distinctions that have stood the test of time and that embody the wisdom of long experience. They cannot easily be bettered by any projecting reformer who sits down in an armchair to determine how we should speak in the light of reason. Austin's attitude towards the English language is thus quite similar to that of Burke's towards the British constitution. Both are convinced that no workable alternative will be found by apriori legislation. Philosophers are not unconsciously to chose the very example from current usage that constitutes plausible evidence for the particular rational construction they wish to advocate. Austin wanted to make people "sensible" and clearheaded and immune to ill-founded and doctrinaire enthusiasm (after all, quite in the tradition of Hume). But Austin was also consciously a radical reformer who had suggested a specific and largely original interpretation of

(13) Stuart HAMPSHIRE, "J. L. Austin", in Richard RORTY (ed.), *The Linguistic Turn*, University of Chicago Press, 1967, p. 242.

that which constitutes clear thinking on abstract topics. He knew that this was an achievement that would rightly be regarded as subversive; it was (in his own words) "tampering with the beliefs" of his audience merely by insinuating unusual standards of verbal accuracy into the dissection of hallowed arguments. The true conservatives, in philosophy as in politics, are those who accept discussion of traditional problems in traditional terms.

Explanations may be said to be at different "levels", and what is an explanation at one level need not necessarily be one at another. Fruitful scientific procedure depends on assuming that no given law is basic. To explain is always to explain in terms of something. But the analogies which seduce the philosopher are not usually private phantasies; they have their roots in ordinary thinking. To talk about our sensations, for instance, is to play one language-game; to talk about material objects is to play quite another. To try to reduce the one to the other is like trying to talk about tennis in the vocabulary used for talking about soccer. The Oxford philosophers abandoned the thesis that there is a hierarchy of concepts and of perceptions, stretching from the ultimately simple to the highly complex, and denied that a language can be considered a homogenous calculus. But even Ryle felt himself unable to reject entirely the idea that there is at least some kind of parallel between grammatical form and the form of facts⁽¹⁴⁾. For Ryle's special kind of translation which consists in going from a "more misleading" to a "less misleading" form of expression, some criterion of misleadingness, or conversely, of propriety of grammatical form, is required. The question "How does our understanding function?" is treated for philosophical purposes as equivalent to the question "What sorts of argument could be produced for the things we claim to know?" But we should beware of concluding that there is any one field (e.g. ethics or metaphysics) in which *all* arguments equally must be invalid. Such a conclusion indicates that irrelevant canons of judgment have been applied in the

(14) Dudley SHAPERE, "Philosophy and the Analysis of Language", in RORTY, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

analysis. Ever since Descartes, philosophers have been perplexed by the problems he raises about the fallibility of our senses. Yet it is only the false expectation that arguments from how things look to how things could ideally achieve analytic validity that creates the problem here.

Many cases of reputed ordinary language analysis are in fact disguised reformations and such activity differs only in degree from that of the avowed reconstructionist or system builder. Ordinary language is constantly being reformed and quite often we find it necessary to help this evolution along simply because ordinary language provides no univocal guide as to what should properly be said when novel situations arise⁽¹⁵⁾. As an example of a philosophical problem which arises in ordinary language but which need not — perhaps cannot — be solved in ordinary language, Carnap cites the paradoxes of Zeno. By far the greater number of important and interesting philosophical problems have arisen out of these non-paradigmatic cases which are either the result of scientific discoveries or of speculation along scientific lines. While the analytic-synthetic distinction is crucial for analytic philosophy, many moves, and virtually all of those which are philosophically interesting, are not so easily classified. A character or design is neither “simple” nor “complex” in some absolute sense. Indeed, “simple” and “complex” are not contrary descriptions in the metaphysician’s language-game which is rather different from our everyday talk. To designate something as “simple” metaphysically is not to describe it but to make the logical point that only one empirical description can be offered of it. Similarly, if we wish to say against the doctrine of “simples” that “Every thing is complex”, then we are making the logical point that every entity can be described in a variety of ways. When Ramsey said that although we can make many things clearer, we cannot make everything clear, he was, considered from the standpoint of ordinary language, very obviously mistaken. There are a great many occasions on which we could rightly claim that we have made

(15) Grover MAXWELL & Herbert FEIGL, “Why Ordinary Language Needs Reforming”, in RORTY, *op. cit.*, pp. 193-194.

something clear to somebody. Yet in the context of the philosophical controversy, Ramsey's remark was called-for, sensible and true. We cannot "make anything clear" if that means formulating it in such a way that it is logically impossible for anybody to misunderstand us, and that is the sort of "clarity" Ramsey's philosophical contemporaries were looking for. Only by considering how such statements are actually used in philosophical controversy can we possibly hope to understand them; we need to know the history behind them⁽¹⁶⁾. If we interpret a philosopher's statement as a wholly unsophisticated person might interpret them, they very naturally make "nonsense".

Men are free to play many language games. These are verbal tools for intellectually exciting tasks, like explaining, theorizing and problem-solving. Many of the British philosophers who do what they describe as "analyzing or categorizing concepts", or "explaining the logic of concepts" are still discussing the meaning and uses of words, and almost always of English words. Nearly all of these philosophers have been professing empiricists, and one would not expect an empiricist student of language to claim that people "cannot" say things which they do in fact say. Ayer, for example, in *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) presented as an apriori truth his version of the verification principle, and proceeded to deduce from it that many of the statements which people make are "meaningless", e.g. statements about God, about what is right and good, and indeed all metaphysical statements. Similarly, Ryle in *The Concept of Mind* (1949) told us that it is through making a "category-mistake" that people have accepted the kind of mind-body dualism held by Plato, Descartes and most Christians. But Ryle later had to acknowledge that this use of "category-mistake" can be given no theoretical justification⁽¹⁷⁾. Nevertheless, not all Linguistic philosophers have stopped trying to cure people from saying things which they do say. Since a philosopher ought to be sensitive to the grammar of the language in which he does his

(16) John PASSMORE, "Arguments to Meaninglessness: Excluded Opposites and Paradigm Cases", in RORTY, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

(17) *Dilemmas* (1954), p. 9.

philosophing, English-speaking philosophers cannot afford to neglect the findings of Austin and Ryle. But whether these findings are of first importance for French or Russian philosophers, is another question.

III

In a general sort of way the language habits of a group are related or reflect other group habits. The vocabulary of any people reveals what they have found it important to differentiate and name. Analysis of vocabulary reveals the principal emphases of a culture and also reflects culture history. Language does influence how we talk about what we experience and how we categorize our perceptions. Yet in many philosophical investigations language is taken for granted. This approach has therefore been challenged by a number of linguists and anthropologists. Edward Sapir argued that language is not merely a more or less systematic inventory of the various items of experience, but that it actually defines experience for us⁽¹⁸⁾. Benjamin Lee Whorf developed Sapir's claim, maintaining that a language constitutes a sort of logic, a general form of reference, and so models the thought of its habitual users. He argued that there are significant relationships between the general aspect of the grammar and the characteristics of the culture taken as a whole. In English, and the standard average European languages generally, there seem to be two dominant forms of sentence: the subject-predicate type of statement and the actor-action type. In either case the subject is typically an enduring object — something recognizable through time. Usually events are spoken of as if they were stable objects, and much of the fluidity of passing experience seems to be lost. This tendency, as Whorf has noticed, extends in particular to the notion of time itself. We speak of time as a substance of indefinite ex-

(18) Edward SAPIR, "Conceptual Categories in Primitive Languages", *Science*, 74 (1931), p. 578.

tent, and such ways of expression are of importance not only in the organization of the details of experience but specifically for philosophy. The classic answer to the problem of sense-perception, already fully developed in Aristotle, was that the universe is composed of substances and that everything perceived is an attribute of some substance. Aristotle actually defined substance as that which is always subject and never predicate. But much of twentieth century philosophy has been a polemic against these conception.

Speech is a social activity that varies considerably as we pass from social group to social group, as do religion, custom, art and social institutions of different people. Yet there is no more striking fact about language than its universality; we know of no people that does not possess a fully developed language. Indeed many primitive languages have a formal richness that eclipses anything known to the languages of modern civilization. What can be said in a language is obviously not independent of what has been said and is being said. It is quite clear that, in some sense, one who knows a language, tacitly knows a system of rules. Fluent speakers both produce and understand sentences that they have never previously encountered. Whorf pointed out that the phenomena of language are to its speakers largely of a background character and so are outside critical consciousness and control. Therefore, where anybody is talking about reason, logic and the laws of correct thinking, he is likely to be conforming merely to grammatical facts that have something of a background character in his language or family of languages. Users of markedly different grammars are pointed towards different types of observation and toward different evaluations of externally similar observations. Every language seems simple to its own speakers because they are largely unconscious of its structure. Especially the underlying forms and categories of a few culturally predominant European tongues are taken for granted and their complex web of presuppositions is made the basis of a false simplicity⁽¹⁹⁾. There is a persistent tendency to

(19) Benjamin Lee WHORF, *Language, Thought and Reality*, M. I. T. Press & John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1956, pp. 82-83.

mistake the rules of language for those of reality. The "ego" in the Western tradition, for example, is the hypothetical substance upon which meaning is received, the constant which endures through all changes of experience. The traditional manner of speech will make it difficult to understand that there can be an "enemy-friend", "conflict-collaboration", "virtue-vice", or "cause-effect". The difficulty is not so much of finding a language to express such insights as in overcoming the social resistance to a radical change in the "forms of life" upon which a particular culture depends. To change vocabulary and ways of expression is indeed to alter the most basic and pervading of all social institutions.

As a pattern of behaviour, any society is above all a system of people in communication, for without agreement as to the use of words, signs and gestures there is no communication. We cannot prohibit what we cannot name, and no metaphysics is speechless, none escapes from its own vernacular into some realm of pure material evidence. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to say that *all* the experience of the enculturated adult is wholly ordered by his linguistic patterns. To the extent that languages differ markedly from each other, we should expect to find significant and formidable barriers to cross-cultural communication and understanding. But it is easy to exaggerate linguistic difficulties of this nature and the consequent barriers to intercultural understanding. No culture is wholly isolated, self-contained and unique. There are important resemblances between all known cultures as well as languages — resemblances that stem in part from diffusion (itself evidence of successful intercultural communication), and in part from the fact that all cultures are based upon biological, psychological and sociological factors which all human beings share. Intercultural communication, however wide the difference between cultures may be, is not impossible. Translation is a fact, even of poetry. It is one thing to say with Whorf that language "colours" our perceptions, and quite another that it determines them. Only this latter position leads to a cultural relativism which in the end turns out to be self-defeating. Natural languages differ not so much as to what *can* be said in them, but rather as to what

is relatively *easy* to say. The impact of inherited linguistic patterns is generally least important in the more practical activities, and most important in story-telling, religion and philosophy. After all, Whorf, while arguing that the prevailing Hopi metaphysics is radically different from that in the standard average European languages, has given his account of the Hopi philosophy in English. The fact that English speakers do not have different names for several kinds of snow (as some Eskimos have) cannot be taken to mean that they are unable to *see* the differences. Anyone who has had to learn more than one language knows that there is *some* translatability between the languages he speaks, but that there is not a one-to-one correspondence⁽²⁰⁾. And even in our own language, a good many of the stumbling blocks that seem to impede a solution for semantic quandaries tend to look less formidable once one has accepted the apparent paradox that the question "What is the meaning of ... ?" may have more than one valid answer expressible in other words. In organic use the meaning of a word is inevitably affected by its context (note the eminently justifiable objection to be quoted "out of context"). But context implies more than just the surrounding words, in the last resort it comprises the entire state of affairs at the time and place of the utterance and all that has led up to it⁽²¹⁾. The diversity of culture as well as of language results from the ease with which societies elaborate or reject possible aspects of "existence".

Deductively irresolvable disagreement as to logical truth is evidence of deviation in usage or meaning of words. Alternative logics are therefore practically inseparable from mere change of usage of logical words. "Illogical" cultures are likewise indistinguishable from ill-translated ones. There can be no stronger evidence of a change in usage than the repudiation of what had been obvious⁽²²⁾. Although language may imprint its structure to some degree on our ways of reasoning, scientific method is

(20) Paul HENLE (ed.), *Language, Thought and Culture*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1965, p. 19.

(21) Louis B. SALOMON, *Semantics and Common Sense*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. New York, 1966, p. 3 and p. 50.

(22) QUINE, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

largely invariant with respect to language and culture. Artificial languages may be true purely by convention, but once the strings are interpreted, we have to decide what we talk about, i.e. what is real. To say that language "mirrors" the structure of reality (as Wittgenstein does in the *Tractatus*), or that there are "simples" (Russell), or even that there are things more simple or basic or less misleading than others (Ryle) — is to talk metaphysics. There is also nothing to prevent us from arguing that we take some ideas to be more simple or self-evident because of the way our "mind" or "language" works. A real alternative would be to anchor "obviousness" within a given context or system, and to deny that there is *one* all-over framework in which such categories apply. But even if we accept Wittgenstein's doctrine of the "family-resemblance" of words and the lack of precise boundaries as inevitable, there remains a common core which makes a "game" a game. It is this central or common sense connotation that we convey when we teach a child the meaning of a word.

There are many languages, constantly changing and widely different from each other both in vocabulary and in grammar. It would be a mistake to think of language with a capital L, as some Platonic ideal language to which actual languages in different degrees approximate. Entirely unrestricted and unqualified existential statements of the form "There are no so-and-so's" are rather uncommon in ordinary discourse, but their characteristic use is in expressing a quasi-philosophical conclusion: "There is no God" or "There is no such thing as sin". A man who understands and can explain what is ordinarily meant by "sin" cannot properly say that the word is meaningless. But he can properly say that there is no such thing as sin. He is not objecting to the *word* as having no established place in the vocabulary and no recognized conditions of use; he is objecting to the concept, that is, to the customary application of the whole set of distinctions which are involved in the use of the word. To reject a concept is to reject a whole system of classification as in some way or another inadequate; and the sufficient grounds for rejection cannot be given without some comparison between terminologies and systems of classification. We have to find

grounds for thinking and talking in one idiom rather than another⁽²³⁾. In any one period there is a tendency to take one method of confirmation, appropriate for some one type of expression, as the self-explanatory model to which all other types of expression are to be assimilated. Philosophical doubts take the form of a more general comparison of the degrees of certainty obtained in the use of the different expressions, a comparison which deliberately cuts across the divisions of type. The scepticism about a particular range of expressions is felt in practice, rather than worked out in theory. In order to define somebody's philosophy, it is enough to discover what existential statements he takes to be unproblematic and in need of no further explanation. Somebody who, in exaggerated respect for the common sense of the moment, refuses to make such weighted and critical comparisons, refuses to enter the domain of philosophy.

There is a solid nucleus of questions which almost all philosophers recognize as distinctly philosophical. It is certainly not the case that all philosophical problems disappear as soon as attention is drawn to some misuse of, or ambiguity in the words or expressions used in the formation of the problem. It is equally not true that in solving or dissolving philosophical problems it is unnecessary to consider any matters of fact. The history of the subject shows that many of the most important philosophical problems have been suggested by a clarification of new developments in the methods of the sciences and of mathematics. Actually it is not language but we who are clear or muddled. There are many syntactical irregularities and ambiguities in our languages which do not in fact mislead or perplex people; that some of them sometimes do, could properly be called as much a fact of human psychology as a fact about language⁽²⁴⁾. Philosophy was once considered as the study of Reality; later it came to be conceived as the a priori study of Mind or Knowledge. In

(23) Stuart HAMPSHIRE, "The Interpretation of Language, Words and Concepts", in RORTY, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

(24) Stuart HAMPSHIRE, "Are All Philosophical Questions Questions of Language?" in RORTY, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

the same manner it is now often regarded as the a priori study of Language. But it is reasonable to suppose that philosophers will once again become discontented with an abstraction and will turn to a methodical study of the facts, to comparative linguistics, and the like. Analytic philosophers have often limited "knowledge" to that which can be expressed in propositional statements, but the range of general use is much richer and wider. We live in a "world" of symbols — not one kind of symbol, and not one system only, but in a number of relatively self-contained symbolic systems. The notion of "final truth" is one that the modern temper tends to treat with scepticism; the characteristic agreements and disagreements between philosophers nowadays express themselves not so much in doctrine as in method. However, there is no simple and uncommitted position from which to evaluate the contribution of a style in philosophy. There is rather a "family-resemblance" among the different ways of doing philosophy: both Ordinary Language philosophy and Phenomenology for example object not so much that false answers have been given to philosophical problems, but that the questions themselves have been articulated in misleading ways. As a cure therefore, both movements prescribe a return to the original everyday experience, unadulterated by any speculative thinking. Wittgenstein's "don't think but look!"²⁵ has obvious resemblances to Husserl's "To the things themselves". It is mainly because of the phenomenologist's claim to have intuitions which transcend the limits of language that most analytic philosophers think Husserlian phenomenology has gone astray⁽²⁶⁾. But phenomenologists argue that we can notice that our conceptualizations are inadequate and that experience gives us hints in what direction to improve it. We can and must gradually move away from ordinary usage. Even according to Austin, "ordinary language" is *not* the last word; in principle it can everywhere be supplemented and improved upon and superseded.

(²⁵) *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 31.

(²⁶) Guido KÜNG, "Language Analysis and Phenomenological Analysis", in *Akten des XIV Internationalen Kongresses für Philosophie*, Herder, Wien, 1968, vol. II, p. 251.

Philosophical method is itself a philosophical topic, and all attempts to substitute knowledge for opinion in philosophy are constantly thwarted by the fact that what counts as philosophical knowledge seems itself a matter of opinion. As a sociological generalization one may say that what makes most philosophers in the English-speaking world linguistic philosophers is the same thing that makes most philosophers in continental Europe phenomenologists — namely, a sense of despair resulting from the inability of traditional philosophers to make clear what would count as evidence for or against the truth of their views. While very few philosophers have been willing to characterize philosophy simply as an art form, no clear procedure has ever been put forward for determining whether a word did or did not adequately express a thought. Rational argument is possible on delimited and specialized questions but there is no agreed upon criterion when a word's meaning has been extended and when it has been changed. Consequently, the extent of agreement among linguistic philosophers about criteria for philosophical success is inversely proportional to the relevance of their results to traditional philosophical problems. We are forced to recognize that a "given situation" may be described in many ways. Linguistic philosophers lack criteria for success in dissolving philosophical problems, if one means by it a demonstration that there is "no problem" about, for example, perception, free-will or the external world. However, granted that "deviance" is not in itself a criticism of a philosopher's use of language, the insistence that deviance, or *prima facie* silliness, be recognized for what it is, is of crucial importance. Experience has shown that the traditional philosopher often cannot explain why he uses ordinary words in unfamiliar ways. The positivist philosophers have not produced knock-down, once-and-for-all demonstrations of meaninglessness, conceptual confusion, or misuse of language on the part of the philosophers they have criticized. But in philosophical discussion, by the nature of the subject, the best one can hope for is to put the burden of proof on one's opponents.

It might be that linguistic philosophy could transcend its merely critical function by turning itself into an activity which

discovers necessary conditions for the possibility of language itself (in a fashion analogous to the way in which Kant purportedly discovered necessary conditions for the possibility of experience). Rorty indeed suggests that the metaphysical struggles of the future will center on the issues of reform versus description, of philosophy-as-proposal versus philosophy-as-discovery. Radical changes in the vocabulary used in formulating substantive terms are likely to produce changes in the metalanguage and therefore in philosophy. But this relationship is of a complex nature and is as yet not well understood. If it were not for the epistemological difficulties created by the "spectatorial" account of knowledge, some of the traditional problems of metaphysics (problems for example about universals, substantial forms or the relation between mind and body) would never have been conceived. Specifically, the contrast between "science" and "philosophy" may come to seem arbitrary and pointless⁽²⁷⁾. However, the spectatorial theory of knowledge is assumed by science and by most of philosophy, traditional as well as analytic. It is closely related to the subject-predicate structure of Indo-European languages and to classical Aristotelian logic. But although theoretically this grammatical form does not seem to be absolutely necessary, so far no real alternative has been advanced. On the contrary, when Wittgenstein substituted for Frege's concept the proposition as the basic unit of meaning, he emphasized a spectatorial theory of knowledge and metaphysics. The "limits" of language are imposed above all by this basic structure. Yet if there are things which cannot be said in language, but which nevertheless are important and of value, there *must* be a way of conveying them, for how could we otherwise come to know that they are important? "Nonsense" is after all a highly relative notion, and that which has recognized meaning in one context may have little or none in another.

It is thus only at the surface level that language seems to be more accessible than Mind or Reality. Once we proceed to deal with "depth" grammar, we are faced again with all the traditional metaphysical puzzles. Strawson equates "descriptive meta-

(27) RORTY, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

physics" with the study of the "conceptual scheme" ⁽²⁸⁾, but he discusses *our* concept of a person as if it were changeless. Mundle thus rightly remarks that Strawson's "our" includes only "sensible" people who have not been corrupted by science, religion, or non-linguistic philosophy ⁽²⁹⁾. It is true that the standards of intelligibility of the late twenties and early thirties — "whatever can be said at all, can be said in ordinary (thing-observational) language" — have been undergoing a process of continuous liberalization. But Bar-Hillel still argues that those speculative philosophers who are interested in having analytic philosophers discuss their theses must use a "scientific" metalanguage as their rational tool of persuasion ⁽³⁰⁾. The point at issue between the analytic and the speculative philosopher turns thus upon the nature of the metalanguage of philosophical discussion — but this is no different from philosophy itself! The real problem is to determine the role of science and of common sense vis-à-vis philosophy. However, "common sense" is a particularly English term which has no exact synonym even in French and German. "Common sense" has a long history in British philosophy that is closely linked to the common law tradition and the practice of reasoning from precedents. It is certainly no accident that Austin started his philosophical career by analyzing specimens of logical reasoning. This tradition proved socially most effective — it made sure that certain things were not only "not done", they could not even be discussed without lapsing into nonsense. A respect for alleged "facts" (which on closer inspection often turned out to be no more than social taboos) and the corresponding demand of being "sensible", i.e. conforming to these conventions went thus hand in hand. It is notable in this connection that almost all the leading members of the Vienne Circle "flourished" finally in English speaking countries. But there are no apriori standards of intelligibility; the point at issue between the analytic and the

⁽²⁸⁾ P. F. STRAWSON, *Individuals*, Methuen, London, 1964, p. 9.

⁽²⁹⁾ C. W. K. MUNDLE, "Anglo-Linguistic Philosophy", in *Akten*, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 359.

⁽³⁰⁾ Yehoshua BAR-HILLEL, "A Perequisite for Rational Philosophical Discussion", in RORTY, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

speculative philosopher is precisely *where* to draw the line of what is intelligible. A given term or expression may be intelligible in some of its uses (meanings) but of doubtful status in others. There are thus the same difficulties in agreeing upon a common metalanguage in which to discuss the relative merits of the various philosophical object-languages as there are in the original philosophical argument.

Wittgenstein's philosophical career illustrates this development. There is an antimetaphysical strand in all his philosophy but this is not necessarily associated with positivism. He used the word "metaphysics" in a highly specific sense — to designate the kind of philosophical discussion which "obliterates the distinction between (i.e. confuses) factual and conceptual investigations" ⁽³¹⁾. We can discover "the higher" only in that which the propositions of our language are unfitted to capture. Wittgenstein's central question could be posed in the Kantian form "How is meaningful language possible at all?" Throughout all his philosophical work, Wittgenstein was attempting to delimit the scope of the "sayable", and just as Kant ended by recognizing that the tendency of reason to overreach itself is a necessary and creative element in human thought, so did Wittgenstein. If men were to talk about ethics and theology at all (Kant had pointed out that they could not help doing so), this must be done in something other than a literal fact-picturing mode of discourse. Wittgenstein speculated at times that such a language might have something of the character of poetry. Perhaps poets might somehow possess the power Schopenhauer had claimed for musicians, namely the power to convey insight which could never be literally uttered. May be the "ethical", though inexpressible in "direct discourse", could after all be hinted at in some less "representational" way (e.g. in the manner of Zen). But it is not clear that Wittgenstein's final account of language will support his ethical point of view. The "meaning" of any utterance was determined for the later Wittgenstein by the rule-conforming symbolic activities ("language-games") within which the expressions in question are conveniently used. These

⁽³¹⁾ Zettel, 458.

symbolic activities in turn draw their significance from the broader patterns of activity (or "forms of life") of which they are a consistent element. By the time the final transition is complete, Wittgenstein would have had to abandon altogether the contrast between literal descriptive utterance and ritual performative speech. Yet by this final step, he would have dismantled the very criterion for distinguishing the "sayable" which language can encompass from the "transcendental" which the nature of things renders inexpressible⁽³²⁾. In this final phase, Wittgenstein apparently implied that ethics and religion have "forms of life" of their own, within which ethical and religious "language-games" become — in their own way — verbalizable.

It is part of being human to learn a language and this means, among other things, to learn to grasp "objective thought contents" (as Frege called them). The activity of understanding consists in effect in operating with intelligibles, for we have always to pick out our problem against an intelligible background. This background consists at least in a language, which always incorporates many theories in the very structure of its usages (as emphasized by Whorf) and many other theoretical assumptions unchallenged at least for the time being. It is only against a background like this that a scientific *or* philosophical problem can arise at all. Every attempt (except the most trivial) to understand a theory is bound to open up a historical investigation about it. As a rule, the metaproblem of understanding a problem will be more difficult and more interesting than understanding the problem⁽³³⁾. Unlike common sense, science, and the mathematics and logic which make it possible, are not determined by any particular language or culture. Scientific knowledge is the paradigm of all valid knowledge, and as such it inspires philosophy.

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(32) Stephen TOULMIN, "Ludwig Wittgenstein", *Encounter*, January 1969, p. 69.

(33) K. R. POPPER, "On the Theory of Objective Mind", in *Akten*, *op. cit.*, vol. I.