1
LANGUAGE

The question is of things, not of eulogistic names for them; and the best word is the one that enables men to know the quickest whether they disagree or not about the things.

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William James
"The Dilemma of Determinism"

Philosophy has changed a great deal since the time of William James. In the twentieth century philosophers cleared up the problems that muddled our thinking. The logical positivists reminded us that philosophy's job was not to provide "knowledge of a reality transcending the world of science and common sense" (Ayer 33). Philosophic statements, in order to be meaningful, must be verifiable in principle or by experience:

> To test whether a sentence expresses a genuine empirical hypothesis, I adopt what may be called a modified verification principle. For I require of an empirical hypothesis, not indeed that it should be conclusively verifiable, but that some possible sense-experience should be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood. If a putative proposition fails to satisfy this principle, and it is not a tautology, then I hold that it is metaphysical, and that, being metaphysical, it is neither true nor false but literally senseless. It will be found that much of what ordinarily passes for philosophy is metaphysical according to this criterion, and, in particular, that it can not be significantly asserted that there is a non-empirical world of values, or that men have immortal souls, or that there is a transcendent God. (Ayer 31)

We must reduce complicated sentences down to their basic meanings and do away with linguistic confusion by returning philosophy to the type of analytic activity it was supposed to be rather than treating it as an exercise full of unverifiable propositions built on faith. The analytic philosophers, as well as many after them, preferred this *reductionism* and the *scientific method* to the language games played by philosophers in the past. Although one should not confuse philosophers with scientists, it is useful to know that they both, as analysts, solve problems—one by forming hypotheses and performing tests, the other by disentangling linguistic and logical problems from gibberish, transcendental notions and bad thinking.

There is nothing worse than the fallacy of language, which creates certain thoughts that would otherwise not be there. Nietzsche recommends that "we really ought to free ourselves from the seduction of words" (*Beyond Good and Evil* par. 16), and other empiricists warn us that "philosophers think that if the words are framed correctly, then they can somehow produce [metaphysical

claims, such as] proof for God's existence. But ideas of things and the things themselves are different where existence is concerned" (Robinson 44). These modern thinkers realized that the fundamental problem of philosophy was one of language. According to the analytic tradition,

> the correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science—i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy—and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—this method would be the only strictly correct one. (Wittgenstein 1156)

Language certainly has its benefits, but it must be used carefully. We know that it is often the case that metaphysicians "show how easy it is to write sentences which are literally nonsensical without seeing that they are nonsensical" (Ayer 44). It is best that writing be more scientific, by which I mean, as Daniel Dennett mentions, "an impersonal, stripped-down presentation of the issues with a minimum of flourish, rhetoric, and allusion" (11). Many philosophers misuse language, modifying it to construct arguments whose structure seems valid. Language has a tendency to produce ideas which contradict reality; an anti-natural system of discourse has been abused by sophists and mystics, and we must not forget the three laws of logic (from Aristotle, but also identifiable in Hegelian dialectics): the law of identity ("whatever is, is"; A = A), the law of non-contradiction ("nothing can both be and not be"), and the law of the excluded middle ("everything must either be or not be"; "if not one then the other"). No good thinker has the privilege of contradicting himself for the sake of his own arguments, which he may have developed psychologically for one reason or another. No matter how clever a writer or philosopher believes he is, he cannot forsake logic and common sense and rely instead on ornamental language; such writing should be left for poets.

In order for language to be useful, definitions must be fixed; for philosophers this means looking for "definitions in use" (Ayer 59), good definitions that "increase our understanding of certain sentences" (61). An exceptional understanding of the terminology that philosophers use, as well as our everyday lexicon, is always helpful for understanding and advancing arguments. Furthermore, William of Ockham understood that "it is not enough for the logicians to have a merely general knowledge of terms; he needs a deep understanding of the concept of a term" (455). Ockham was a nominalist who recognized that there are only individual particulars in the world, and that words are simply signifiers or names:

> Those are called Nominalists who show diligence and zeal in understanding all the properties of terms on which the truth and falsity of a sentence depends, and without which the perfect judgment of the truth and falsity of a proposition cannot be made. These properties are: supposition, appellation, ampliation, restriction, exponible distribution. They especially understand obligations and the nature of the insoluble, the true foundation of dialectical arguments and their failure. Being instructed in these things, they easily understand concerning any given argumentation whether it is good or bad. [. . .] Master John Gerson said, "While you proceed to things, neglecting terms, you fall into complete ignorance of things themselves." (454)

As we shall see, *Ockham's Razor*—the law that one shall not concern himself with more than what is necessary, that the simplest explanation should be sought in place of one that is more complicated—is quite a grand, logical tool; *reductionism* and *nominalism* are two key features of being able to distinguish truth from belief. To better understand the philosophic necessity of the reduction of language, we must look at the two basic types of words.

Where abstract words are used, meaning becomes obscured (which is the problem with many philosophic works). For this reason, it is often true that writers who are also empiricists are the easiest to comprehend; their focus is on experience, and they are careful with their choice of words; their statements can be reduced to observable facts; they do not burden readers with a lexicon invented to express their idealism. This does not mean that we must reject words designated to the whole and only rely on those terms that describe parts; it simply means that we discard abstract language that is outside of reality (transcendental). "Love" is not outside of reality, but it is difficult to discuss strictly because its definition is not fixed. In order to carry on a proper dialog concerning love, we must reduce the abstract term to observable acts—this is exactly what a therapist would tell his patient. Simply because a patient might say, "My husband no longer loves me," doesn't mean that the therapist, according to our rule, would not be able to discuss the matter; it only means that the therapist must demand a series of concretes that accurately demonstrate (prove) the wife's claims. If the patient does not have a sufficient amount of data to convince the therapist, or if her definition of love is a highly romanticized fiction—her notions of love are outside of reality, something one finds in the movies, in Pre-Raphaelite paintings, or in romance novels—then it is the duty of the therapist to tell her that it is irrational to hold such an ideal, that "love" can also mean protecting a spouse, providing for family, sexual intimacy, i.e. actions that are observable, realistic, and concrete. And if the husband has abandoned all these deeds, but yet still claims to love his wife, then it is he who must confess that he is no longer in love, or else he fails to understand his actions don't properly represent his feelings. Like unrealistic wives and their husbands who fail to recognize their own feelings, or demonstrate them accurately, so do poor philosophers confuse themselves and their readers in their metaphysical discourse, contradicting themselves while trying to convince readers that what they say is true.

We must remember that all abstract words have definitions that are not fixed; their meanings may be ambiguous and their connotations various. Abstract terms differ from what Ockham calls absolute terms, or words that have real definitions. Connotative terms, although they may appear simple because we tend to overuse them, are complex because they do not have real definitions. Although we do experience some things we tend to call "feelings," these things are unique, personal, and subjective; we tend to run into problems when we use vague language that describes secondary qualities rather than concrete language to explain the events which causes them. To better understand this, one need only examine poetry.

Concrete words, on the other hand, are a type with which we should concern ourselves. Concrete terms are definitive and descriptive; they are not prescriptive and their secondary meanings carry little or no weight. Such words are significant because they describe our world—or attempt to—objectively. Unlike abstract words, which tell us about a non-empirical world of values, they explain real things which are demonstrable through sense-experience, matters of fact. Such words define the physical properties of things. Dishonest philosophers and sophists tend to find such language less interesting than scientists because it is not manipulatable; they cannot create ambiguity and confusion by distorting realty; they cannot propagate dangerous ideas.

So, when discussing any philosophic dilemma, we have to realize that we must first use words that correspond to "matters of fact," but this does not mean that we cannot discuss ethics

and aesthetics or other subjects some philosophers, like Wittgenstein and Ayer, would consider super-empirical or *transcendental.* We must, however, before getting to those matters, understand that our arguments—our methods and our reasoning—must rest inside reality and be based on experience, observation, or irrefutable major premises. As Bertrand Russell reminds us, "Insight, untested and unsupported, is an insufficient guarantee of truth" ("Mysticism and Logic" par. 13).

Knowing that our language must represent facts of reality and their relations, one can begin focusing on gathering useful knowledge of those facts. American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce did not believe that philosophers should concern themselves with ultimate truths but that they instead should have useful ideas, solutions with "cash value." Peirce argued that the first step to thinking logically was clearing the rubbish cluttering up common sense: "The truth is, that common-sense, or thought as it first emerges above the level of the narrowly practical, is deeply imbued with that bad logical quality to which the epithet metaphysical is commonly applied; and nothing can clear it up but a severe course of logic" (1055). Much of modern philosophy is built upon the thoughts of the pragmatists, empiricists, and analytic school of philosophy; the mystical wanderings of theologically-minded philosophers have been left on the ash heap of philosophy. The metaphysical assertions and other super-sensual claims made by idealists, theologians, and other transcendentalists are refuted and dismissed by the new linguistic and reductionist methods that we employ. But before we learn the reductionist approach, we must first make sure our understanding of the proper ways to structure an argument is clear. To form sound arguments, we must follow some rules that will allow us to distinguish true from false thinking; we must know the process of induction and deduction.

Conclusion: Does Language Condition?

In *The Language Instinct,* Steven Pinker attacks the old notion that the language we use determines the ideas we have:

> In much of our social and political discourse, people simply assume that words determine thoughts. Inspired by Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language," pundits accuse governments of manipulating our minds with euphemisms like pacification (bombing), revenue enhancement (taxes), and nonretention (firing). […]
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> And supposedly there is a scientific basis for these assumptions: the famous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic determinism, starting that people's thoughts are determined by the categories made available by their language, and its weaker version, linguistic relativity, stating that differences among languages cause differences in the thoughts of their speakers. […]
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> But it is wrong, all wrong. The idea that thought is the same thing as language is an example of what can be called a conventional absurdity: a statement that goes against all common sense but that everyone believes because they dimly recall having heard it somewhere and because it is so pregnant with implication. (56-57)

To believe that language precedes thought, or that numbers come before our knowledge of them, or that musical notation somehow influences our musical ideas or determines scales,

is putting the cart before the horse; however, to suggest that some language—such as politically correct language—can never influence a person is a grave error. I would have to say—and we can argue this through simple observation—that Orwell's ideas shouldn't be ignored completely. Here I would like to compare another failure of faulty cause and effect. Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment—which is routinely cited in many psychology textbooks but is flawed in so many ways (Zimbardo's small experiment did not include enough variables—age, IQ, class, etc.)—assumes all minds are equal, and that people will react to specific conditions in certain ways; such assumptions are naïve. Similarly, the assumption that weaker intellects cannot be persuaded by words is dangerous. Not everyone is able to resist propaganda; words do matter. And like the films we watch, the books we read, and the clothes we wear—in other words, *culture*—how we are conditioned to use language can control what we think, just as our customs, religion, and family may contribute to our behaviors. To put it clearly, culture of course is the totality of ideas, of art, of our actions, and does not necessarily determine those ideas, artistic works, or behaviors; however, one would be foolish to reject the notion that one's surroundings may produce thoughts that otherwise might not be there. (In the final pages of this book, we will consider what Richard Dawkins says about *cultural relativism.*) In order to appreciate this idea, one needs to properly develop a rational view of the world; this means learning how to separate good thinking from bad thinking.

To better understand the process of moving from particulars to universals, from empirical data to theory, we must review some fundamentals of logic.