Words and Things

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As is well-known the line between the ridiculous and the sublime is notoriously difficult to draw, maybe because there is no sharp line, maybe no line at all. Wittgenstein is one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century with a reputation for being difficult not to say obscure, and sublimely so. Such a reputation attracts rather than repels if there is a tacit understanding that at the end of the rainbow there is a pot of gold. But influential is not the same as good, and in fact the most effective way to attain celebrity is through notoriety. The book by Gellner is not a philosophical discussion of language and linguistic but a spirited diatribe against the influence of Moore and Wittgenstein on philosophical thought, in particular its manifestation in the Oxford school of linguistic analysis. As a diatribe it is well-written, entertaining and persuasive, just as a successful diatribe is supposed to be. On the other hand it is long and repetitive in order to allow the author to spend his rage fully and thoroughly. The reader maybe excused for finding it at times tedious as well. No sooner has the author hit one of his adversaries before he picks him up again from the floor, revives him briefly only to hit him again from a slightly new angle. Victims that are knifed to death not infrequently suffer scores and scores of stabs, where one or two well directed ones would have sufficed, because the perpetrator is consumed with such a wild fury that he is unable to stop himself. Gellner has a few very good points, each of them being potentially fatal, but he presents them all, good as well as the merely frivolous. It may be good pedagogy because the reader has his mind pummeled. Still in spite of it, or maybe because of it, there arises in the mind of a reader a slight suspicion that maybe those philosophers are not so bad after all. Maybe their systems maybe defunct not to say non-existent, but surely they may have a good insight here and there, as well as some telling metaphors. Wittgenstein is after all an aphoristic philosopher, and even if he intellectually is but a junk-yard of half-baked ideas, the patient beach-comber who strays into his domains may pick up a gem or two, useful for his or her own purposes. Should we not treat them with the same kind of sentimental and tolerant indulgence with which we treat religious texts, especially the Bible, as a rich font of poetry and metaphor, maybe incoherent as a whole, but with bits and pieces of gleaming jewels? Of course Wittgenstein cannot compete with the Bible in terms of inspired nonsense, but at least he tried, and some of his sayings are hard to circumvent. To some extent the author follows that advice when he occasionally quotes from his adversaries, putting them into slightly different contexts. Then they often turn out to be elegantly expressed insights not without some profundity. They may be fools, but there is no denying that they are clever fools, and therein may lay the greatest tragedy.

Philosophy, science, poetry and religion are four different things, but in the beginning of human thought they were hard to separate. A man given to the play of thought would be engaged in all four, expressing himself at times poetically, at times religiously, and constantly beset with the curiosity which pertains to our surrounding material world, the

latter activity generally known as philosophizing rather than doing science, the latter notion not yet individuated. The 19th century saw the establishments of grand metaphysical theories at the same time as science made great progress, in particular for the first time ever translating its insights into technological innovations that changed profoundly everyday life. As a result great prestige was accrued to it and as a consequence philosophy was left behind and there was a movement to shed its metaphysical ballast and make it become more and more scientific. One of the more palpable effects of that was the developments of formal languages intended to make for ultimate clarity and set permanent foundations. One such notable effort was that of Russell and Whitehead trying to base mathematics on formal logic admittedly with mixed success. One of the works inspired by the efforts was Wittgenstein's Tractatus. In it he tried to envision a perfect language based on atomic sentences each one of them mirroring an atomic fact in the real world. What could not be said was to be considered nonsense[1], an attitude of restriction enthusiastically taken up by the proponents of Logic positivism. Such perfectness had to be paid by a severe loss of interest, because as Gellner reminds the reader, new ideas are often very vaguely conceived and bound to be expressed ambiguously, and Wittgenstein lost interest in his pursuit of truth. When he finally returned to philosophy again he repudiated his earlier approach and instead of pursuing a formal language he decided that natural language could do as well, after all that is all that we have. In particular instead of seeing language as something outside the world mirroring it, language is part of the world and does not in any significant sense interact with it. Yet there is a strong continuity between the early and the later Wittgenstein in his emphasis on formality, in particular philosophical problems were seen as an abuse of language and the purpose of philosophy was simply purely therapeutic, i.e. to dissolve the confusion and mental cramps associated with philosophical inquiry. Rather than being an adventure of thought and an attempt to understand the world and go beyond the limits of the apparent, philosophy did not interact, it left the world as it was (except possibly the confusion of philosophical paradoxes to be rendered harmless and removed). The hidden assumption was that language was, so to speak wise, and that it provided us with all what we needed to know, and besides it was our only means of thought and inquiry. In particular the common sense attitude that pervades language use was also the correct one. There was no veil of mere appearances to be torn away, what was, was what was seen. This attitude of common-sense was also practiced assiduously by Moore, according to Gellner the most pedantic of all philosophers, whose real genius lay in his uncanny and no doubt unintentional ability to mesmerize a whole generation of intellectuals who should have known better[2].

In short philosophy was trivialized, its most pressing problems, such as that of epistemology, the question of free will, the existence of other minds, the problem of consciousness, not to mention various ethical quandaries; all of that which had obsessed philosophy throughout its long history, were dismissed as mere grammatical confusions. Furthermore the methodology of philosophical thought, of finding unity behind seemingly disparate

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[1] famously expressed by the last line of the work to the effect that of what one cannot speak one should remain silent.

[2] The innocence of Moore has been testified to by many of his contemporaries with a mixture of awe and derision.

phenomena[3], was replaced by an attitude of polymorphism, in which everything was permitted and inconsistencies were ignored and brushed away. The general method simply did not exist, everything had to be done on an ad-hoc basis fully savoring the individuality and uniqueness of each situation. So what was left? Not very much, and what remained was trivial, insignificant, and when relentlessly pursued, excruciatingly boring. Instead of being an invitation to thought, modern Linguistic Philosophy became a denial of it. In fact all what was left was so called 'pure research' or 'l'art pour l'art', pedantic analysis of language use, haphazardly pursued without any systematic ambitions let alone without any formulating of general and crucial questions. Bad enough, if ultimately harmless, when practiced by a small academic community safely ensconced in the proverbial ivory tower, but disastrous, not to say criminal, when offered in lieu of real intellectual and moral instruction to young impressible minds[4].

Why was this movement to successful? After all it was pursued by men of no mean cleverness. Maybe there is such a thing as too much cleverness? One of the important insights of the crisis of mathematics at the turn of the last century was the idea of formalization. While traditionally a function had been thought of something meaningful done to one variable and then producing a value, it was simply redefined formally as a set of ordered pairs (satisfying some mild conditions to single it out from the more general notion of a relation[5]) and now something that is routinely taught to beginning students[6]. This is

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[3] This was already practiced by the pre-Socratic philosophers, notably by Parmenides who gave it its ultimate expression. But it was of course not confined to Western Philosophy, Parmenides is to be found in the basic tenets of Hindu philosophy as well.

[4] Gellner of course was not the first to take exception, similar reservations were voiced throughout its ascendency, such as by Collingwood who resented Russell and the usurping of philosophy by so called analytic philosophy degenerating into typographical jargon. Russell of course was as disgusted as any other traditional philosopher, applauding the writing of Gellner's diatribe.

[5] introduced by Russell and thought of him as the first crucial innovation in logic after Aristotle

[6] This emasculation and the apparent paradoxes connected with this is well illustrated by the Richard's paradox, supposedly being the inspiration for Gdel. The paradox is really nothing but yet another application of the diagonal principle by Cantor, but unifying ideas can only be conveyed and appreciated by a sequence of examples. The formulation is simple: What is the smallest integer not determined by ten words? The crucial thing is of course the word 'determined', it presupposes that sentences have meaning and can relate to the outside world. In other words meaning is some kind of function that 'meaningfully' interprets each sentence. In this case we are only concerned about sentences relating to integers, with the great majority of sentences being meaningless in that sense. How to make sense of it? The cheating way is simply to give a list of all sentences (or better still only those of ten words or less, each word accepted by some particular dictionary) and associate to some of them a number, no matter what. Now with this list the Richard sentence has a meaning, but that meaning is not derivable from within the list itself. By asking it we change the list. Sentences in the list are nothing but string of typographical signs, the creation of the list, endows one of those sentences with a meaning, a 'soul' so to speak, transcending its typographical representation. Of course this endowment of meaning is only possible by introducing a mind, namely that of the questioner. In a sense we as producers and interpreters of sentences play the role of God imbuing the inanimate with sense.

of course very convenient as it involves a large amount of cheating[7] and also very clever. Indeed why worry about 'meaning' and such 'naive' matters, why not take a cynical and hard-headed approach and dismiss them altogether? Language is a game defined by its use[8], philosophical discourse, at least such practiced by Linguistic philosophers themselves is but a game as well, with hidden rules and conventions. When we use language, we simply use it rather than employ it in some inquiry (heaven forbid one that goes beyond it). To assume that our use of it makes a difference is pure naivety, it is but one activity among others in the world, and as noted above it leaves the world as it found it. Most intellectuals are lazy, it is only when a refined intellect is wedded to a sustained effort something exciting may possible arise. Thus the allures of an activity which puts no demands on effort, requiring no need to learn technicalities, absolves the user of a systematic methodology, and above all, relieves him of the potential humiliation of a falsifiable statement, are hard to resist. And this its practitioners concede claiming self-depreciatorily that philosophy begins and ends in platitude. As Gellner speculates, the inevitable erosion of religious authority coupled with the waning of a classical education, created a vacuum in university education into which Linguistic philosophy was quickly sucked in, filling all the cracks of the cavity. Linguistic philosophy becomes a haven for the gentlemanly activity of a refined mind reluctant to be sullied by effort.

But maybe there is something to Linguistic philosophy after all? Not its merely sociological manifestation[9] but the possible existence of potential questions that may inspire exciting inquiry. Our language is indeed both one of our most intimate possessions as well as making no sense unless socially shared. Its ability to speak about itself is intriguing, as is its relations to thought itself. There is of course a potential paradox here, as every intellectual pursuit is through the medium of language, in particular the study of language itself; and an understandable if resistible and truly dangerous idea that a proper understanding of language would provide the key to all of its fruits (science, philosophy, literature etc) naturally imposes itself. But properly restricted, language poses a host of intriguing question on the borderline between science, history and metaphysics. The problem as in all worthwhile inquiry is to pose the right questions. One natural example is the problem of translation between languages. Such can never be perfect, nor can there exist canonical ones, any translation is bound by its purposes (which varies greatly) and can only be judged against those. Translations are labor intensive activities involving the linguistic competence of individual minds. To what extent can a translation be effected by a computer, i.e. through an algorithm? To try to solve this problem one is brought against the need of context to interpret isolated sentences. Sentences do not exist in isolation but refer to others, something that is taken for granted by the human mind, but which presents almost insurmountable difficulties for the programmer who wants to automate the process. Ultimately we encounter the contrast between semantics and the formal properties of language. The problem may very well be insoluble but its very open-endeness

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[7] But cheating may occasionally serve legitimate purposes as well.

[8] A clear case of behaviorism

[9] True philosophy is characterized by an absence of psychologism, it cannot be explained in psychological terms; while pseudo-philosophy only becomes intelligible when the psychology and social relations among its partitioners are taken into account.

makes it promising as a project. Related to this is how we learn languages, and to what extent we are prewired to do so. This gives connections to neurological research as well as 'evolutionary anthropology'[10] One thing seems clear that we cannot divorce language use from the context it is being employed. We learn new words not from dictionaries, but from encountering them in situations where their need is paramount and hence our acquisition is instinctive and subconscious [11] The problem of language study when pursued in depth is its self-referential nature. The temptation to resort to language subjectivity when judging use is irresistible, especially when there is no alternative.

Language occupies the middle position between Platonism and psychological subjectivity; it is not eternally fixed beyond the wills and decision of human minds, in fact it would not make sense without them, on the other hand it has intrinsic conventions of its own, unable to be flouted by the individual, as it is a truly social entity. It is on one hand the medium in which thought can make itself manifest, on the other hand it is also assisting in the process of thought, and thus haplessly creating it. To the cynic it is not clear which of the function is the most basic and the one that first evolved.

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[10] The nature of the language capabilities of other primates is very interesting, as well as our possibility to communicate with other mammalian species.

[11] There is only a minority of words we remember as having intentionally learned, with most words there is no events to be attached to an episodic memory.