

Pathways to Philosophy

PROGRAM D: PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

Language and the World: Unit One

(a) private language and the normativity of 'meaning'

1. WHY are philosophers interested in language? Here is one possible answer. Human language is the subject of scientific investigation: the science of linguistics. Just like any other branch of science, linguistics raises philosophical questions. For example, How does linguistics mesh with other sciences, such as psychology, or sociology, or biology? What distinguishes the methodology of linguistic inquiry from other forms of inquiry? What constitutes an adequate test of a linguistic theory? – Yet pursuing these questions would hardly give a clue why the issue of language has so dominated philosophy in the twentieth century. Just as metaphysics was once thought of as the fountainhead of philosophy, now the philosophy of language occupies that envied position. Many of the central problems of philosophy, it has been claimed, such as the definition of truth, the nature of substance and identity, the place of mind in relation to the world, are in fact problems concerning language. The practice of philosophy has indeed come to be centred on the analysis of language. The philosopher does not simply ask what it is to be a person, or what is the essence of knowledge, or causation, or time as such, but rather seeks to uncover what is meant by the terms 'person', 'cause', 'knowledge', 'time', by displaying the *philosophical analysis* or the *logical form* of propositions in which these notions appear. – It turns out, however, that one of the terms whose meaning is very much in question is that of the concept 'meaning'! The philosophy of language, in seeking the meaning of 'meaning', thus becomes a prime example of philosophy reflexively turning in on itself.

2. What *is* the meaning of 'meaning'? When someone says that a certain expression has a meaning, or means the same as another expression, what do they mean by that? – On second thoughts, is that an intelligible question? Even granted that the question is intelligible, is asking it straight off necessarily the right way to start our philosophical investigation? Then again, doesn't the competent speaker already know full well the meaning of 'meaning'? How can the essence of language remain hidden, when language serves as the very medium of our thoughts? Or is it that the philosopher, just like any other competent speaker, already knows implicitly what 'meaning' means, but still faces the challenge of articulating that knowledge in the form of an explicit definition? – Why do we hesitate here? Why is the answer to our question concerning meaning not plain and obvious?

3. Let us step back a little. One influential American philosopher has argued that the notion of an expression's having a certain meaning, or of two expressions having the same meaning has no scientific or philosophical validity whatsoever (W.V.O. Quine 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism', in *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd Edn Harvard 1961). According to Quine, language expresses our beliefs and theories about the world, but there is ultimately no valid basis for separating off the factual claim made by a statement – that which we assess as true or false – from its semantic content, which belongs to the statement by virtue of the meanings of the words of which it is composed. There is no certain way, in other words, of distinguishing between disputes over the facts and disputes that are 'merely verbal'. That is not a view that we are equipped to take issue with at this early stage, but it should make us pause. We cannot be sure that, in seeking the meaning of 'meaning', we are not pursuing a phantasm of the philosopher's own creation.

4. Perhaps there is no absolutely safe place to start, no bridgehead that we can establish that is totally secure from unexpected ambush. All one can hope to do is minimise the risk. So let us not take anything for granted. Let us not take for granted that we use words to 'refer' to things, or that the statements we make 'have a meaning', or even that they are 'true' or 'false'. Let us not even take for granted that there are such things as 'languages' apart from the overlapping linguistic dispositions or 'idiolects' of individual speakers – no such thing as English as such, or Urdu or Serbo-Croat. All one can say for sure is that we utter sounds, or put marks on paper which *seem* to have

meaning for a certain group of people, while lacking any meaning for others. These sounds or marks we identify as 'words' and 'sentences'. (That is not to assume the existence of an acceptable definition of a 'word' or a 'sentence'.) Undoubtedly, we *do* things with the things we call 'words'. Just what *is* it that we do seems a sufficiently safe, non-committal question to ask.

5. One might fruitfully think of words as tools that we use to accomplish certain purposes, or as counters in a game, which we manipulate according to certain rules. These are, admittedly, only metaphors. Whether the application of such metaphors is beneficial or harmful depends upon how hard one presses the analogy. For it is not as if one first encountered the purpose, and then constructed linguistic tools to meet it, as one might design a nutcracker, or a mousetrap, or a typewriter. Nor are we free to please ourselves in making up language games in the way that we make up other games, let alone decide what the rules are to be. The form and content of linguistic rules is dictated by the purposes language serves. It is not even clear in what sense we *know* the rules of language, or could even articulate them however hard we tried. Yet, in the face of these doubts, it does seem that words, like any other tools, can sometimes be misused, or fail to work altogether. We unintentionally break the rules, or else fail to establish coherent rules in the first place. – As a bare minimum, one can say that the use of words is something one *evaluates* as correct or incorrect: though we may not be certain at this stage just what are the appropriate dimensions of such an evaluation. In other words, the activity of using words has a *normative* aspect.

6. That might not seem a very promising start. To say that there is such a thing as right or wrong in the use of words hardly indicates what is important and unique about language, that urgently merits philosophical inquiry. To focus and motivate our inquiry, we need an illuminating example where the use of language seems to have gone wrong, where words fail their intended purpose, or where the purpose itself has been misconceived. Here is a seminal thought experiment:

Let us imagine the following case. I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign "S" and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation. – I will remark

first of all that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated. – But still I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition. – How? Can I point to the sensation? Not in the ordinary sense. But I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation – and so, as it were, point to it inwardly. – But what is this ceremony for? for that is all it seems to be! A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of a sign. – Well, that is done precisely by the concentrating of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connexion between the sign and the sensation. – But “I impress it on myself” can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connexion *right* in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can’t talk about ‘right’.

L. Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* 3rd edn, G.E.M. Anscombe (tr.), Blackwell Oxford 1967, Part I, §258.

For someone who opened the pages of the *Philosophical Investigations* at random, this little vignette would seem oddly puzzling. We do, after all, experience from time to time strange feelings or sensations to which, so far as we know, no specific name has been given, experiences which we should feel hard pressed to describe accurately to others, though we might be quite sure to recognise if we came upon them again (‘a momentary sad giddiness’, ‘the prickly taste of a forgotten memory’ are the kinds of terms that might gesture towards the thing that we mean). Suppose that such a feeling occurred several times, what would be so odd about making up a word for it, and, if the experience seemed of sufficient importance to take note of, recording its occurrence in a diary?

7. The philosopher of language would reply that we have taken the story of S out of context. In order to gain a fair impression of the target of Wittgenstein’s critique, one needs to carefully work through the paragraphs that come before and after. Yet it is equally fair to say that philosophers who have minutely examined the entire text of the *Philosophical Investigations* still differ widely and vociferously in their interpretation and evaluation of

Wittgenstein's argument here. So let us conduct our own thought experiment. Imagine that after a nuclear holocaust just a single fragment of the book survives, on which only the text of that one paragraph is legible. Eager for a text to work on, we seize upon this solitary fragment and try to make sense of it. Was it written by a philosopher whose ideas deserved to be reckoned with? At a first glance, the fragment hardly seems worth discussing. The conclusion appears all-too obviously false in the face of the inexhaustible richness of human experience. On second thoughts, perhaps that knee-jerk response is wrong. The unknown author is making a profound philosophical claim, if only one had the key to unlock its meaning. Starved of philosophical input, that is something we desperately wish to believe. The question is, can one *reconstruct* the necessary context that would reveal the remark as a valid and important observation concerning the essential nature of language?

8. One student suggests shyly that maybe the author is right: we cannot take note of our inexpressible feelings, or know for sure whether or not we experience the 'same again'. But she is quickly shouted down. We are all-too painfully aware of the limits of language when it comes to describing our innermost feelings to one another. That does not mean that there is not something quite definite *there* inside. Surely we can know and recognise those inner feelings when they occur and recur, even though we may be at a loss to make their reality *patent* even to those closest to us.

9. Another student ventures that maybe the key point is that 'a definition of the sign cannot be formulated'. There are, by hypothesis, no other words to convey what 'S' means, not even of the form, 'the feeling you get when...'. The one and only fact in virtue of which sign 'S' has a stable meaning is the continuing association between the sign and the mental object S, as it appears solely in the subject's consciousness. In other words, we are to suppose that the diarist rules out from the start any possibility of discovering further facts about S, for example that it is associated with certain kinds of characteristic behaviour, or with things that happen to, or impinge upon the diarist's body, or even with internal biological processes. The diarist's deliberately modest intention, in coining 'S', is to avoid making *any claim whatsoever*, however unspecific, about the world external to the diarist's own mind, the world as it appears to other subjects. Since no such claim is made, no-one else could ever, even in principle, be in a position to dispute the application of the term 'S' in

a particular case. The diarist remains the sole authority on whether S occurs or not.

10. But why is that a problem?, comes the reply. Doesn't that illustrate the essential nature of the subjective standpoint, that there are certain things about which we are the sole authority? For example, no-one can ever know how giddiness feels to me, or how blue looks to me, even though they may be in no doubt that I feel 'giddy' or can see 'blue'. These familiar terms focus on the common circumstances that give rise to, or are associated with the subjective feeling giddiness or the subjective sensation of blue: for example, alighting unsteadily from a funfair roundabout, or looking up at a clear blue sky. The only difference is that 'S' is deliberately intended to refer to a subjective object, without any claim being made concerning its relation to the objective. The same effect could have been achieved by coining a word for *my* giddiness, or *my* blue, the subjective quality of feeling that I experience in me when I ride on a roundabout or look up at the sky, feelings which no-one else can ever appreciate simply because they are necessarily given to me, and me alone, in the privacy of my own consciousness. Why then does Wittgenstein think that naming such 'private objects' is an empty ceremony? Why can't I know exactly what I mean when I say, 'Here is S again', or 'Here is my blue again'?

11. One student comes to Wittgenstein's defence. How, in the absence of any possibility of an external check, can one *trust* one's memory? Isn't this the point: that in order to use the sign 'S' correctly I need to keep a representation in my imagination of the precise quality of S, to use as a reference in order to judge whether each successive experience qualifies as S or not? How can I ever be sure that the representation remains constant over time? – The suggestion raises a storm of protest. When all is said and done, we have to trust our memories. All human knowledge presupposes that memory can be relied upon. Nor, if genuine doubts were to arise, would it be any solution to rely on the memory judgements of others. We could all be wrong in what we seem to remember. – Yet isn't it strange, the student bravely persists, that in the case of 'S', or 'my blue', there is no way to say what being wrong could *mean* except in just those very terms. I am wrong about S when I judge that a feeling is 'S' when it is in fact not S, or when I judge that a colour impression is 'my blue', when it is in fact not my blue. How can there be such a thing as

the *fact* that something is not S, or not my blue, apart from my subjective judgement that something *seems* not S or not my blue?

12. Another student speaks up. I sometimes wonder, he says, whether my world was not painted in brighter colours when I was a child. Yet when I look back, I cannot tell for sure whether that is merely a trick played upon me by my memory, or whether the sky really did look bluer, the grass really did look greener, buttercups really did look yellower. Could it not be a fact all the same, even though a fact that one cannot express in any other terms, whether the incommunicable subjective quality of my colour impressions has become dimmer over time? – This question now gives rise to heated debate. On one side, it seems beyond doubt that the intrinsic quality of a subjective experience is a fact, which remains a fact for all time. Looking into the past, the only person qualified to judge that fact may, for all he could ever know, be right or may be wrong about what he seems to remember. – Those who, for the first time, find themselves impelled to take the other side, however, now reluctantly agree that it is impossible to conceive how there could be such unknowable-in-principle ‘facts’ concerning a subject’s past subjective experiences. As Wittgenstein remarks, so far as my memory of the subjective quality of my past experiences is concerned, ‘whatever is going to seem right to me is right’. If I think that my visual impressions are dimmer now than when I was a child, then they *are* dimmer. If I think that they are not dimmer then they are not dimmer. There is no significant distinction to be drawn in this case between the present appearance and the hypothesised ‘past reality’.

(b) what keeps our use of language on track?

13. We are not yet in a position to make any attempt to resolve this debate. Wittgenstein’s own stated view was that, so far as explaining the workings of human language was concerned, ‘a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said’ (*Philosophical Investigations*

I/§304). 'Always get rid of the idea of the private object in this way: assume that it constantly changes, but that you do not notice the change because your memory constantly deceives you' (ibid. Part II/p. 207). – But just suppose that there are indeed timeless, objective facts concerning the incommunicable qualities of our subjective experiences in relation to which judgements expressed in a 'private' language do not merely *seem* right or wrong but *are* right or wrong. (It is true that Wittgenstein only says that we cannot *talk* about right/wrong.) What is clear at any rate is that the hypothesis of 'private objects' cut off from any connection with the physical world *has no significant role to play in accounting for the way language is actually used*. When I talk about the blue of the sky, I am talking about a colour to which others can have as good an access as I. When I talk about feeling giddy, I am talking about a phenomenon with physical causes and effects, and characteristic behavioural manifestations. We all live under the same sky. Riding on funfair roundabouts has predictable effects on the human constitution. Something other than an 'association between words and mental objects' is going on here that explains how we are able to use language successfully to describe our experiences to one another. – The question is, How does our language work, if not by each individual's mentally associating words with incommunicable subjective experiences? What is the force or steering mechanism that keeps our use of language on track?

14. Before attempting to answer that question, let us first pause for a moment to marvel at some of the things language can accomplish. Just as I can look up at a clear sky and say, 'What a delightful shade of blue!', so I can point to the bottle of black ink that the assistant in the stationary shop has just mistakenly handed to me and declare, 'That is not blue!' Or I can exclaim after my funfair ride, 'My goodness, I feel giddy!', or tell the doctor examining me a few days after my hospitalisation for concussion, 'I do not feel giddy now.' These points may seem childishly obvious. However, for the philosopher of language starting out by attempting to make the minimum of assumptions, they ought to seem puzzling. Even if one grants the modest claim that at least one of the central functions of language is to express and communicate the way we find things, or how things are in the world, how is it that a thought concerning 'blue' can be appropriate in a situation where blue is present, while another thought concerning 'blue' can be no less appropriate in a situation where blue is absent? How is it that a thought concerning 'giddy'

can be appropriate in a situation where the feeling of giddiness is present, while another thought concerning 'giddy' is appropriate in a situation where the feeling of giddiness is absent? How can I think of the meaning of 'blue' and mean *not* blue, or think of the meaning of 'giddy' and mean *not* giddy? In other words, what is negation? What is this magical power of the word, 'not'?

15. Whatever language does must amount to more than simply attaching labels to objects or situations that we encounter. For otherwise, if blue is absent from a given object or situation, then there would be nothing for the linguist to do with the label 'blue'. If no-one is feeling giddy, then the 'giddy' label remains in the box. The relation between name and object can only constitute one aspect of the functioning of language, it cannot comprehend the whole of it. A statement that can be true or false is not like a name or label which one either attaches or one does not attach, depending on the presence or absence of an object which the label fits. Nor is it simply a list of such labels, for a mere string of labels would not hang together in the way that a statement hangs together, would not be capable of being 'true or false'. – These simple observations will turn out to have profound implications.

16. There is another, equally important aspect of language, which might also be described as being concerned with negation, but in a rather different way. So far, the examples we have looked at have concerned the use of language to describe states of affairs that are *present* to the speaker. It is hardly necessary to say to myself, or indeed to anyone else, that the sky is blue when that fact is patently obvious to everyone with eyes to see. Nor is it necessary to tell myself that I feel 'giddy', when the very feeling engulfs my consciousness. Yet I can also tell someone else, as I step off the roundabout – who may or may not be feeling giddy themselves – that I 'feel giddy', someone for whom the giddiness *I* feel is not present but absent. Equally, I can talk about how blue the sky was yesterday, or of a blue sky recorded long ago in the journals of Captain Cook. In this way, language serves as a potentially far-reaching extension of our powers of perception. By telling you how I feel, I make my experience available to you by means of a linguistic proxy. Reading the Captain's journal, the very words embody the knowledge I would have gained had I been on board with the author at the time when the words were written. In both cases, the words in some so far mysterious way seem to make what is absent present to the hearer's or reader's mind.

17. Here then are two ‘marvels’ of language: the ability to state what is *not the case*, and the ability to describe states of affairs that are *not present* to a person who understands what is said. To those two cases one may add the case already remarked upon in relation to the thought experiment of a private language: the possibility of making a *false judgement* concerning the applicability of a given term to a certain situation, or, more generally, the false judgement that things are the way a given statement states that they are. The states of affairs that we use language to describe can fail, due to an error on our part, to match up with reality, not only when we are describing something absent but also when we are describing something present; or, rather, seemingly present. One might indeed say, somewhat controversially, that the fundamental lesson of the rejection of a ‘private language’ is that no state of affairs is ever *simply* present – present as such, without the slightest room for error – to the mind of the linguist. As soon as judgement reaches beyond the subjective standpoint of the speaker to make a claim about the objective world, howsoever modest a claim, then there arises the possibility of error. – It is *learning* to wonder at facts such as these, which do not strike common sense as strange or marvellous only because they are so all-pervasive, which provides the impetus for pursuing the philosophy of language.

18. We asked earlier, ‘What is the force or steering mechanism that keeps our use of language on track? (13). But we had not at that point established just what it is that our language is on track *of*. Are we in any better position to say now? Undoubtedly, cognition plays a significant role. One of the things that we use language for is to keep track of *the facts* – or, rather, what we take to be the facts. We may find ourselves in dispute over the truth of a particular claim, but such disputes are only possible against a relatively stable background of agreement in the words are used to express factual claims. But how is such linguistic agreement established and maintained? How is it that we are able to continue to understand one another despite our disagreements? It seems that there are just two possible explanations. One possibility is that the force that guides our linguistic practices is *external* to those practices, in other words, something in the nature of reality that gives authority to the rules governing the words we use. Alternatively, the force in question is nothing more than that which we more or less continually exert upon one another, a constraint *internal* to those very practices themselves. –

One might think of the difference metaphorically as that between the laws of a divine right monarchy, and the laws of a democracy. The question is, are the speakers of a language in fact capable of being effectively their own law-makers, or is there necessarily some higher authority involved?

19. The question we have just posed is one aspect of the ancient *problem of universals*. According to the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, in addition to the concrete objects of sense perception there existed abstract objects such as Justice, or The Horse, or Square, or the number twelve. But his *realism* concerning concepts had an added metaphysical dimension. He believed that it was our knowledge of these non-sensual 'Forms' or 'Ideas' that actually guided us in making judgements about whether a certain act was just, or in recognising a horse, or doing a geometrical construction involving a square, or in counting twelve horses. the Forms functioned as an external authority. In learning the words 'just', 'horse', 'square', 'twelve', one learned, through repetition of examples, which Forms the words referred to. – That is to say, in terms of Platonic metaphysics, one *recalled* the forms with which one's soul had directly communed before it was born into a physical body and thereafter condemned to live in the confusing world of sense perception.

20. One of the main tasks for the modern philosophy of language may be seen as an attempt to find a workable alternative to Platonism. We have seen that one possible avenue is closed off. It might initially seem plausible to think that when a child is taught to speak, it learns to associate words with certain experiences that cannot themselves be put into words. As I look up at the sky I am told that the colour I see is called 'blue'. Yet the subjective experience that I enjoy has no name that anyone can understand but myself. It is the incommunicable *this* inside me which I learn to call 'blue'. Each of us looks up at the same sky, but each only sees his own 'blue', his own 'this'. Ridding our theory of language of such reference to 'private objects' – whether on the grounds of the incoherence of the idea of a 'private language', or merely on the grounds that positing private objects amounts to a vacuous explanation of the workings of language (13) – leaves no alternative but to locate all that is essential to giving words their stable currency in the linguistic practices themselves, and the wider social context. – The meaning of words is a function of their *use*. It is in this sense that the explanation for all the things we do with words must be open to view; if only

we had the wit to see, the patience to untangle, the skill to interpret the essential patterns within the seemingly endless complexity of linguistic behaviour.