

Pathways to Philosophy

PROGRAM D: PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

Language and the World: Unit Two

(a) the difference between names and propositions

21. HOW does language work? If words are tools, what purpose do they serve, and how do they accomplish that purpose? If words are counters in a game, what are the rules of the game, and what counts as winning or losing? – It is easy to fob these questions off by saying that there is no single thing that we do with words, that they serve all sorts of purposes and function in a wide variety of ways; or that there are countless many ‘language games’, each with their own rules, or their own point. All that *may*, in some sense, be true. Yet the desire for a comprehensive, synoptic grasp of the essence of language will not easily be appeased. We must either give the desire exactly what it seeks, or else provide a clear proof that the desire cannot in principle ever be satisfied, because its object is non-existent or impossible.

22. Let us concede that we do not have a clear picture at this stage of what it is we are looking for when we seek to uncover the ‘essence of language’, or even understand what that devious phrase means. There may turn out to be no core hidden within the complexity of human linguistic practices that one could identify as exhibiting the essential mechanism of language; a single, primary function that accounts for all the rest. Or, alternatively, supposing that there does exist a primary mechanism, its workings may stubbornly resist every attempt to construct a philosophical *theory*. Yet should either of these lines of doubt proved to be well founded, philosophy would still have something positive to contribute to the project of investigating the nature of language. Just as in science when the so-called failure of an experiment indicates nature’s response to a question we have posed, so a philosophical

investigation of language conducted in an experimental spirit is virtually guaranteed success – provided only that we have sufficient confidence to follow the argument wherever it may lead.

23. Call what we are doing the ‘dialectics of language’. Our investigation is conceptual or *a priori*, rather than empirical, although naturally we cannot avoid having our questions and lines of investigation coloured by our empirical knowledge. We are not necessarily seeking the essence of language, because there may be no such essence to be found, nor a theory of language, because there may be no such theory to be constructed. Then what are we doing? The sense of wonder may, as Plato and Aristotle remarked, be the beginning of philosophy, but simply wondering about the phenomenon called language does not lead anywhere. We need to formulate specific questions, if the dialectic is to be set in motion. And if we are to do that properly, and not risk going off in completely the wrong direction, it is necessary to start at the very beginning. – What then is it specifically about language that first provokes our sense of puzzlement, that could first motivate someone to conduct a philosophical inquiry?

24. One question we asked last time was, ‘What is the force or steering mechanism that keeps our use of language on track?’ (1/13). But even that question only arises some distance into the dialectic. Here are two questions that one might consider. What *connection* does the activity of producing words – certain sounds, or bodily movements, or marks on paper – have to the other physical or mental activities of conscious subjects? And what connection do the things we call words have to other things in the world? It is difficult to resist the thought that, whatever the nature of these two different connecting relations might prove to be, the upshot of their combination is somehow to connect conscious subjects with one another and with their individual or common worlds: in the most general terms, to mediate the relation between mind and reality.

25. How do words manage to do that? Here is a familiar story. Some words name things, while other words relate or classify things. By virtue of that fact certain combinations of words – in the simplest case, a name conjoined with a general term – come to say something about something. That is surely something to wonder at. How is it that mere sounds or bodily moments or

marks on paper come to be *about* anything? How do names or general terms manage to be 'about' the things that they name, or the things that they classify? In what way is that kind, or those kinds of aboutness different from the aboutness of the special combinations of words we call sentences, whose assertion we evaluate as 'correct' or 'incorrect', 'true' or 'false'? (In these terms, 'That's true/false,' simply means, 'I agree/disagree with what you just said.' We are still a long way from raising any *metaphysical* question concerning the nature of truth.) – Rather than make any attempt to define 'aboutness', let us concentrate on the question of difference. Words are not true or false, only sentences are. A word has currency or significance in a language, or fails to have currency. That is to say, either one in some sense knows what to do with a word or one does not know what to do with it. Yet when words are combined in sentences, the combination has currency *whether one evaluates the result as true or false*. I know what to do with a false sentence just as much as I know what to do with a true sentence. I can assert either, depending, say, on whether I wish to lie or speak the truth.

26. How is it possible, then, to *say something false*? What relation between words and the world is involved in making a statement that is in fact (whether one knows or believes this or not) false? We have seen that the same statement relates to or is 'about' the world, whether it is true or false. Yet surely, one might be tempted to think, a true statement is more 'related' to reality than a false one. Should we then say that there exist two quite different relations between a statement and reality? How are those relations related to one another? Or should we say that true statements are indeed related to reality but that false statements remain unrelated? Or that they relate, *not* to reality but to something else? What could that be?

27. Why indeed should these be regarded as serious philosophical questions? They express a sense of perplexity that might strike the reader as either inexplicably deep, or else very shallow, like the nonsensical riddles of a child. Either way, that hardly renders our choice of an initial question – 'How is it possible for a statement to be false?' – any less puzzling. But perhaps the following may serve as an additional motivation. Just as a relativist who denies the very *possibility* of objective truth might accuse the sceptic who merely denies that we could ever *know* the truth of wrongly assuming the existence of a real object that we fail to know, so one might envisage a yet

more extreme view that accused the relativist in turn of wrongly assuming that it is possible for beliefs to *fail* to be true, that the statement of a belief retains some kind of objective status, even if only as a failed attempt at the impossible. If one seeks to put into question the relation between thought and reality then one cannot avoid being forced to go all the way. – Still, it does not matter if the reader remains unconvinced at this point. The proof of the fruitfulness of an initial question in a dialectic ultimately lies in its working out.

28. It is plausible to suppose that the clue to explaining how a statement can be false must lie in the way the sentence that expresses it, or the thought or proposition that constitutes its content, is *structured*. Now both individual words and sentences might be thought of as having a structured syntax: a word is made up of letters or phonemes, a sentence is made up of words. Yet it also appears, in a way yet to be accounted for, that the structuring of words out of letters is more or less *arbitrary* – a contingent feature of a particular vocabulary – in the way that the structuring of sentences out of words is not. (The structure of words is not arbitrary when we are concerned with differences in case, or tense. In effect, we are dealing here with a combination of repeatable components, for example the combination of a present tense verb form with the suffix ‘-ed’.) In other words, we are free to make up or alter the syntactic structure of the basic forms of names or terms in any way we like but we are not free to place words together in any order we like – at least, if we wish to talk sense.

29. How are propositions structured? What could the enormous and varied range of possible contents and indeed of possible ways of expressing those contents in writing or speech ever be thought to have in common? The crucial insight here is to ask what *function* propositions perform. If there is a single pre-eminent function of propositions, then it is by means of the structure of the proposition that such a function is discharged. In that way all possible contents and modes of expression will have been gathered together under the same intelligible principle: in Platonic terms, the Form of propositionality itself. – We cannot, however, assume that the structure of a proposition will simply mirror the apparent or surface structure of the sentence that expresses it. In a way analogous to scientific explanation, we are seeking to account for surface appearances in terms of something that is not immediately apparent.

Just what are the underlying structural elements is something yet to be decided. The structural elements discerned by an account of the workings of a given natural language is not required correspond one-to-one with the words of that language.

30. A statement communicates information. In order to perform that function it must be understood. Therefore, understanding a statement must not presuppose possession of that very information. – Is that a necessary truth, or might things have been otherwise? Let us imagine two gods who, since they already know everything, do not need to communicate information to one another. Instead, they have agreed to associate a numeral with each separate fact or state of affairs that either might wish to call attention to. Their ‘conversation’ might be compared to the story of the visitor to a prison who is puzzled to hear numbers being called out, each one followed by a ripple of laughter: the prisoners, having long ago run out of original jokes, have taken to referring to them by numbers ‘in order to save time’. – The punch line gives the game away. The number language is *parasitic* upon the kind of language which can be used to communicate information. Even allowing the fiction that the gods could point out and number actual states of affairs without resorting to any other language, there is no way they could refer to *possible* states of affairs without first describing them, prior to assigning a number.

31. Propositions, in short, do not *name* states of affairs. If language is possible at all there must exist a means of expression whose internal structure or constitution determines which possible or actual state of affairs it describes, and consequently its aptness for truth or falsehood, without presupposing prior identification of that state of affairs. Grasping the individual words, we are able simply to *read off* the statement made, without first having to establish whether the possible state of affairs that it describes actually exists. That is, one is tempted to say, just what gives language its *use*. (Taken literally, however, this would imply that the capacity to ‘perceive’ states of affairs is something quite separate from the use of language – as if language were merely a code which we use to convey our thoughts to one another, and did not in any way make thought, or at least thoughts of a certain kind, possible. That is a view which we shall in due course come to question.)

32. Mere names of states of affairs would acquire their 'truth' or 'falsity' by our arbitrary choice. Of course, if one thinks of each name as shorthand for some description of those states of affairs then choosing the name is indeed arbitrary but the truth value of the proposition for which it stands is not. – But now imagine *removing* the intermediate description. The point of that impossible supposition is that the denial that propositions name states of affairs is equivalent to the denial that truth is determined by arbitrary choice. We construct propositions. Their constitution is indeed a matter of our choice; for we choose both the content and the manner of expressing it. Yet their truth or falsity is not a matter of choice. The proposition itself determines which state of affairs is described, and, once that is fixed, the matter of its truth or falsity is taken out of our hands. – How could that be?

(b) Wittgenstein's picture theory of propositions

33. Somehow, the idea of 'reading off' must play an essential part in the explanation. In order to understand the proposition, I need to be familiar with the individual words that compose it; but the proposition itself may be one I have never come across before. A proposition is a means of constructing a *new* thought out of *old* components. But that is merely a re-statement of the problem. The question is how there can be such a thing as a 'new thought'. What *is* a thought – or a statement, or a proposition – anyway? It's the same question, all over again. Perhaps the answer is to be found in the analogy between gaining information by reading a proposition, and gaining information by perceiving a state of affairs. In some way, the proposition is able to embody, within its structure, that which is *common* both to the proposition and the state of affairs that makes it true. By opening my eyes and perceiving that state of affairs, I gain certain information. By opening my eyes and perceiving the structure of the proposition, I gain the very same information. There is only one problem: language – or, at least, the only

language we know and understand – simply does not appear to be anything like that. One would be hard pressed to find the common structure in the words, ‘I am having difficulties with the argument in paragraph 33’ and the state of affairs it is meant to describe. The problem is indeed ubiquitous. The same difficulty appears in endlessly many examples.

34. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein believed he had solved that problem. (In his later philosophy, as we shall see, he proposed a very different ‘solution’.) Despite surface appearances, he argues in the *Tractatus*, propositions really are exact *pictures* of possible states of affairs. (That is to say, they are ‘logical’ pictures, in a sense to be explained, not pictures in the literal sense of drawings or diagrams.) Now you can grasp what it is that a picture represents without knowing whether things are the way the picture represents them as being. The possibility of a propositional picture being false, no less than the possibility of its truth is written into the very idea of representation, of mirroring a possible structure that might or might not be found in the world. The only difficulty is explaining how that could be, given the very different surface appearance that our everyday language presents. Undoubtedly, there is structure in the things we say, and also structure in the world that our words describe. The trouble is that there appears on the surface at least a high degree of mismatch between the two.

35. Wittgenstein’s response is to take the traditional route of the metaphysician, but with an added twist. *Reality* is different from *appearance*: the real structure of the world is different from its apparent structure. (Included in the ‘apparent structure’, it must be noted, is the structure of the world as it ‘appears’ when we probe beyond merely surface appearances.) But now here is the twist. The reality of the things we *say*, the true logical structure of the propositions that our statements express, is also completely different from their apparent structure. These two claims, the metaphysical claim about the nature of reality and the semantic claim about the nature of language, are inextricably linked. By inquiring into the conditions under which it would be possible for language to picture reality, Wittgenstein believed that he had uncovered the hidden logical structure of language, a structure which must necessarily correspond exactly to that of the world itself. Only by pursuing the long and arduous route of the logical analysis of our everyday discourse would it be possible to see how it is that structure of

language and the structure of the world are one and the same, as indeed they must be, in Wittgenstein's view, if the things we say in our ordinary language are to be capable of performing the task of saying *how things stand*.

36. First, it is necessary to pay due heed to what might seem an obvious point: that there is more than one way for a given proposition to be true. 'It's raining outside,' is no less true if it drizzles than if it pours. So it is misleading to talk of a proposition representing *a* state of affairs, as if there were only one. When we say things are thus-and-so, we effectively divide up all the ways the things could possibly be – or 'possible worlds' to use a technical term originally coined by Leibniz – into ways, or worlds, in which our statement would be true, and ways in which it would be false. What we assert is that the actual world belongs in the first class, not the second. This idea that the meaning of a statement is its *truth conditions* was one that Wittgenstein derived from his predecessor, the German mathematician and philosopher Frege. Wittgenstein's radical amendment was to identify the logical structure of a statement made in ordinary language with a list of *elementary* propositions of the 'disjunctive' form, P or Q or R or S or..., where an elementary proposition corresponds to a determinate possible state of affairs. – As an analogy for grasping the role of elementary propositions, think of a precise description of the size, position and velocity of every drop of rain. Now imagine – if you can! – a list of *all* such descriptions consistent with the statement, 'It's raining.'

37. Of course, the same state of affairs can still be repeated in different places. It might be the case that it is raining in London but not in Sheffield, or in Sheffield but not in London, or in both places, or neither. (Again, we are giving an analogy: one has to imagine *precise* locations.) Finally, one has to reckon with the fact that the same state of affairs can be repeated in different possible worlds. It can be raining and warm in London, or raining and cold. Either of those possibilities might be the case, and the government can have either won or lost the last vote in the House of Commons. Add up all the other permutations of things that could be the case or not be the case consistently with the truth of the statement 'It is raining in London,' and you have the total number of possible worlds in which that statement *would* be true: a truly colossal figure.

38. Each elementary proposition, meanwhile, must be logically independent from every other elementary proposition. There are no logically necessary connections between states of affairs in the world, argues Wittgenstein; the only necessities arise from the way statements in ordinary language are logically structured in terms of elementary propositions. (To take a simple example, a proposition A, analysed as 'P or Q', logically entails the proposition B, analysed as 'P or Q or R': Thus, the statement, 'I have a parent living in London' logically entails the statement 'I have a relative living in London'.) Another connected requirement is that the 'simple objects' referred to by an elementary proposition exist in all possible worlds. In order that each statement that we make should have precisely defined truth conditions, there can be no world where the question of the truth or falsity of that statement is deemed inapplicable, i.e. where the statement has no 'sense'. Its sense, its truth conditions, must be totally *independent* of the facts. In order to achieve this, it must be possible to say in any possible world whether a given elementary proposition is true or false of the objects it refers to. Such necessarily existent objects are thus unlike any objects we come across. One might think of these simple objects as analogous to map co-ordinates, which remain the same however the details of the map are filled in. They collectively define the 'logical space' within which the details of each possible world are drawn.

39. What identifies the actual world as such is the *totality* of true elementary propositions: 'The world is all that is the case' (*Tractatus* proposition 1). When we make any statement, we are really asserting a disjunction of elementary propositions, the membership of any one of which in the totality of all true elementary propositions is both necessary and sufficient for the truth of that statement. (It is no use arguing with Wittgenstein that we *intend* no such thing when we make assertions. We are only aware of the way our thoughts appear to us, we have no knowledge of their ultimate logical significance.) All that is needed to do now is to show how a language could function in that way, and then we shall have done everything needed to prove that the structure of our actual language – despite all appearances – necessarily mirrors the structure of the world. Appearances to the contrary, the 'ideal' language of elementary propositions described by Wittgenstein is no mere ideal, he claims, but the actual workings of our language revealed.

40. That is all necessary preliminaries, the logical stage setting needed to make Wittgenstein's theory work. Now comes the heart of the theory. The one question Wittgenstein has yet to answer is how an elementary proposition *can* depict a state of affairs. Now an elementary proposition consists in a particular combination of names. The world may be similarly seen as made up of combinations of simple objects. Each combination of names must therefore be *correlated* with a unique possible combination of such objects. This is taken care of by the logical 'grammar' of the language. The possibilities of combination of names allowed for by the grammar of the language of elementary propositions precisely matches the possibilities of combination of the objects that the names have been chosen to stand for. These two relations of 'standing for' and 'matching' are all that is necessary to fix the correlation of elementary propositions with states of affairs independently of any further 'choice'. The correlation is one-to-one: an elementary proposition is true, if and only if, the unique state of affairs correlated with it exists. That is how the propositions are able to represent those states of affairs, by logically 'picturing' a unique relation between the objects that the names stand for.

41. What are the 'objects' of which reality is composed? What relation does an account of the mechanics of elementary propositions bear to the actual processes of human cognition and to human linguistic abilities, the way we are able to understand our everyday language, or use it to express our knowledge of reality? These are questions which Wittgenstein treats as simply irrelevant. He believed he had shown the only way that language can serve to represent the world – in our terms, the only way there could be such a thing as a false statement. How this was achieved in practice he regarded as a matter to be relegated to epistemology or psychology. Either our language works, he would have said, or it doesn't. If it does work, then there is only one way it can work. That is something one simply has to accept, even if it seems impossible for us to imagine how it can work like that. (Of course, it would be quite consistent with accepting Wittgenstein's theory to hold that our language does not 'work' in that sense, that it does not 'succeed in representing the world', and that we are merely under the illusion that it does.)

42. Wittgenstein saw his metaphysics of 'logical atomism' as an intrinsic part

of the solution to the problem of representation. However, if one is prepared to relax somewhat the constraints upon what would count as finding a 'common structure' between language and the world, it might be thought that there remains something of explanatory value even when one applies Wittgenstein's account of elementary propositions to the simple statements of ordinary language. – Consider the following example: In the statement, 'Judy is sitting to the left of Brian', the fact that the name 'Judy' is *placed* to the left of the relational phrase '...is sitting to the left of...', while the name 'Brian' is placed on the right of that phrase *says that* Judy is sitting to the left of Brian. Switching the names 'Judy' and 'Brian' around produces a different linguistic 'fact' which represents a correspondingly different fact in the world, namely that Brian is sitting to the left of Judy. The linguistic possibilities allowed for by the two place relation '...is sitting to the left of...' match the physical possibilities. In a way, one can see, at least in this simple example, something one might call a 'common structure' shared by the statement and the possible state of affairs that it represents.

43. In this spirit, one might go on to view each separate word of our actual language as analogous to a Tractarian 'name'. Then the 'object' that it names is either an object in the ordinary sense – a chair, a person, the Moon – or else a suitably construed *function*, the simplest kind being a function from objects to truth values. (Thus, applying the function '...wobbles' to the object 'my bicycle' yields the value *true* if, and only if, my bicycle wobbles.) The philosophical interest in the project of working out a consistent and complete semantic theory of the functions to be associated with each kind of word or phrase lies in its possibility and not necessarily in the details of its working out. (It is in fact still something of a major industry amongst philosophers of language at the present time.) We do not need that detailed theory to tell us how, provided one is familiar with the grammar and the meanings of the words of a given language, one is able to understand what a proposition means by simply 'reading off' the possible state of affairs that it represents.

44. There remains room for detailed argument over the degree of respect with which the philosopher should treat the words of ordinary language and over the relative illumination provided by different theories which are otherwise equally consistent and complete. But the point about the essentially representational nature of language has been made. And our concern now is

not with the truth which it contains but with the possible illusion which it conceals. The notion of representation does seem to contain all that is needed to comprehend the possibility of a false statement: how a string of words can relate to the world by saying something true or saying something false. However, in that case either the real import of the question has not been addressed, or else the 'representational theory of the proposition' does indeed embody a philosophical illusion.

45. Suppose one were to draw this line: ' _____ ', claiming that it represents, say, the North Coast of Africa. We can indeed construct artificial rules according to which that line is correlated with the particular arrangement of points that constitutes the shape of just that particular coastline. Each point in the line will 'stand' for a point in the coastline and 'match' its possibilities of combination. By accident or design, a complex of points in a system of graphical representation according to which each point lies at a certain distance above or below a given axis might in this unique case be such that the distance was zero; just as 'ba ba ba ba' could conceivably be a sentence of some language.

46. Now suppose that we complicate the rules of this system of graphical representation in the following way: For each different coastline a different *length* of line is arbitrarily chosen and the rules fixed up so that for just that length of line the distance of each point from the axis is once again zero. By making up the so-called rules of this system of representation as we go along, we have, in effect, reduced its propositions to mere names. In order to grasp the supposed significance of a line of a given length, the coastline which it relates to must first be presented in some other way. Wittgenstein was well aware that the rules of a *genuine* system of representation cannot be made up ad hoc; they must in some sense be *lawlike*. The state of affairs represented by a proposition is determined by a 'law of projection' (*Tractatus* 4.0141). But the theory of representation has nothing to say about what *makes* a rule of projection lawlike. We so far possess only the negative criterion that propositions should not reduce to names and do not yet comprehend how it is *possible* for an actual language to satisfy that criterion.

47. What prevents me from making up the rules of my own language – like Humpty Dumpty – as I go along? Other people would not understand what I

was saying. But would *I* understand my language? I should be doing no more than 'naming states of affairs'. If I already possessed a language, then the naming might be seen as some form of private code. Otherwise, my pronouncements would amount to no more than a meaningless babble. Thus, we find ourselves once more having to reckon with the fact that a genuine language is one for which a distinction between *right* and *wrong* about a particular rule applies (1/5). If I could just arbitrarily 'decide' what was right and wrong, the distinction would once again vanish. It must be possible for me to *be mistaken*, to get things wrong. But getting things wrong means having false *beliefs*. If we do not understand how false belief is possible then we cannot ultimately make sense of the idea of a false statement, the idea that our thoughts represent the world by means of language.