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Hilary Putnam

Excerpt

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I

Language and philosophy

In the present century philosophers have been extremely interested in language. To the layman this interest often seems curious, if not downright perverse. After all, there are so many aspects of reality that seem more *important* than questions about words and meanings: are not the nature of the cosmos, the foundations of knowledge, the present plight of mankind, all more fitting subjects for philosophical essays?

In part this attitude rests on a misconception of the nature of philosophy. Philosophy is often the starting point for what eventually turn out to be new consensuses in science and in human affairs; but the starting point is usually dry and technical. Bacon paved the way for all of modern empirical science by arguing that scientists should put their questions to nature, and not to the *a priori* intellect; but it was Newton and not Bacon who discovered the law of Universal Gravitation. Locke paved the way for the ideologues of the American revolution; but he did not make it. To be sure the plight of mankind may yet be improved (or made worse!) by a new consensus in morals or in politics arising out of philosophical ideas being published right now; but one must not expect technical philosophical books to bear their social significance on their sleeves (or dust jackets). If philosophers have become very interested in language in the past fifty years it is not because they have become *disinterested* in the Great Questions of philosophy, but precisely because they *are* still interested in the Great Questions and because they have come to believe that language holds the key to resolve (or in some way satisfactorily dispose of) the Great Questions.

In a way, the layman's impatience with philosophy is very understandable. The special sciences, such as physics, do not pretend to study matters which are immediately of interest to everyone. How many people have a natural and spontaneous interest in the rate at which freely falling bodies accelerate? The layman takes it for granted that physics should be a specialist subject, which is pursued partly because *some* people have a natural interest in these matters and partly because of its practical utility. (He often has very little conception of just how much inquiry goes on in Physics Departments purely for the satisfaction

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of someone's curiosity, with absolutely no likelihood of practical application.) But philosophy grows out of, or is popularly supposed to grow out of, concerns which are felt by every thinking man. It seems less intelligible, therefore, that it should so quickly become a specialist discipline (although it always has been – Aristophanes ridiculed Socrates for the technicality of the latter's interests!). Moreover, laymen are bored and disinterested by philosophy once it does become technical. Yet the culture requires that one profess an admiration for Philosophy, or at least for the Great Philosophers. It is natural, therefore, to say that one is bored, not with Philosophy, but with the current generation of philosophers. And so it has been said – in every generation, not just in this one – that the current generation of philosophers are no true philosophers at all, and that they have turned aside from the 'real' questions (whose discussion would, of course, interest one, and would never become technical).

This perennial tendency to criticize philosophy as 'too technical' is very much reinforced by the 'linguistic' character of contemporary philosophy. For language, as we remarked at the outset, is thought by the layman to be uninteresting in itself and irrelevant to the Great Questions.

We start, then, with a cultural situation. On the one side are the contemporary American and British philosophers, convinced, for the most part, of the overwhelming importance of the philosophical study of language. On the other side are the lay critics of philosophy – *Time* magazine, for example – convinced that such study is largely irrelevant, and that philosophy should return to the Great Questions (which, it is assumed, have been forgotten). Who is right?

As is usual with cultural situations, the answer seems to be that neither side is right. In this chapter, we will attempt to evaluate the success or failure of the attempt to bring semantical methods to bear on the Great Questions of philosophy. It will turn out, unless we are seriously mistaken, that the success claimed for these methods is exaggerated. Yet the lay criticism is misguided in two ways. First, the attempts, whether they have succeeded or failed, were not irrelevant to the basic problems of philosophy. Indeed, even if we have not discovered 'linguistic solutions' to those problems, we *have*, I contend, acquired a great deal of new knowledge about them. This will be discussed below. Secondly, even if the study of language is less relevant to philosophy than has been recently assumed, it is a topic of enormous scientific fascination in its own right, and philosophers have made a real contribution to at least an initial mapping of this topic.

But this is getting ahead of ourselves! Let us work up to the points

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just summarized in an orderly fashion, first seeing how it is that philosophers became involved with questions about language, then taking a look at what they have done with those questions, and only at the end making some overall evaluation.

Even the most cursory reading of the philosophers of the past will reveal that philosophers have always been interested in what have been called 'ideas' – our 'idea' of matter, our 'idea' of causality, our 'idea' of goodness, etc. Other philosophers have spoken of 'concepts' instead of ideas (e.g. Moore insists, in a famous book on ethics, that he is interested in the *concept* Good, and not in the *word*), and still others of 'properties'. Today it is often thought that these philosophers of the past were interested in the usage of words (and hence in linguistic rules, or norms, or anyway practices) without knowing it. Moreover, there is a certain plausibility to this view. What is it to have the concept 'chair', for example? It has often been thought that having such a concept is a simple matter of possessing some image (or the capacity to call up some image), but it is perceived today that this will not do. (This is largely because of the great forcefulness and convincingness of Wittgenstein's arguments against the conception of concepts as 'images', or, indeed, mental objects of any kind, in his book *Philosophical Investigations*.)

Why it will not do to identify concepts and images is a long story, but the basic ideas are not hard to indicate. Let us say that an organism possesses a *minimal concept* of a chair if it can recognize a chair when it sees one, and that it possesses a *full-blown concept* of a chair if it can employ the usual sentences containing the word *chair* in some natural language. (Instead of *chair* the word may, of course, be *chaise*, or *Stuhl* etc., depending upon the language, but we shall neglect this unless it becomes relevant.) Possessing the full-blown concept is possessing a very complicated (and presently very ill-understood) ability. It is easily seen that one might possess the capacity to have chair-images without having this ability. Very likely, a dog or a cat has chair-images from time to time; but a dog or a cat cannot speak a natural language.

Of course, this may be irrelevant. It may be, for example, that dogs and cats possess thought-forms which are just as complex and structured as English sentences. But this seems very unlikely. It seems very unlikely that a dog or a cat is capable, for example, of thinking 'if there had been a chair in the room, then the dinner would not have been delayed'. Moreover, a human being who *does* possess the ability to understand such sentences possesses much more than a set of images.

Consider the following mental experiment. Imagine a 'stream of consciousness' novel written in Japanese. Suppose that, without understanding a word of Japanese, you were to memorize a large portion of

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this novel from hearing it played over and over on records. Suppose that, under the influence of a post-hypnotic suggestion, you were to 'mentally rehearse' this sequence of Japanese sentences, complete with appropriate pauses, intonations, emphasis, etc. If your behavior was not violently inappropriate to the content of what was passing through your mind, then it might be, in a certain sense, *as if* you were 'thinking in Japanese'. If other people could hear your 'inner speech', then they might be convinced that you were in fact thinking in Japanese. A native speaker of Japanese might, if he were telepathic, be absolutely certain that you were thinking in Japanese. It might be part of the post-hypnotic suggestion that you yourself should *feel* as if you understood the sentences passing through your mind, and be convinced that you thought in Japanese. Yet, clearly, you would not be thinking the propositions expressed by the sentences passing through your mind, since you would not *really* (whatever your 'sense of understanding') *understand* those sentences.

The understanding, then, does not reside in the words themselves, nor even in the appropriateness of the whole sequence of words and sentences. It lies, rather, in the fact that an *understanding* speaker can *do things* with the words and sentences he utters (or thinks in his head) *besides* just utter them. He can answer questions, for example (the man, in the example of the previous paragraph, who just memorized a lot of sentences in some language he did not understand, could not do this). Yet this is a bit disturbing. Questions are also sentences, after all, and so are answers to questions. To say that my understanding of the sentences I utter (or think in my head) consists in my ability to respond to questions (other sentences) with appropriate answers (further sentences), makes it sound as if language has nothing to do with the world: it is all a game played with sentences. Why, then, did I not rather say that understanding sentences is being able to point to whatever it is in the real world that corresponds to those sentences?

The reason is that, in the case of most sentences, there is not much to point to. I understand the sentence 'Julius Caesar was a great emperor', but what can I point to when I utter this sentence? Indeed, what can I point to when I say 'I had eggs for breakfast this morning?' (perhaps my stomach). It is quite true that understanding sentences does *involve* being able to use the right sentences in the right situations (if somebody said 'hello' when he was *departing*, we might suspect him of not knowing the meaning of this word); but mostly the 'situations' are defined by what had been *said* previously, and not by nonlinguistic facts. In short, it seems as if language is like a great balloon, anchored to the ground of nonlinguistic fact only by a number of widely scattered

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and very thin (but all-important) ropes. If there were *no* 'interaction' between purely linguistic behavior and nonlinguistic events, then language would be just noise-making; but to determine whether someone understands language, we cannot in most cases compare his utterance with something nonlinguistic for appropriateness (or it would not settle the question of whether the man understood what he said, no matter how the comparison with nonlinguistic fact turned out, although it might settle the question of whether what he said was *true*); but we rather have to *converse* with the man, i.e. we have to see whether he was 'parrotting', or whether he has the ability to use those sentences, and other related sentences, *selectively*, considering what has been said before.

We started out, however, to make the much more modest point that possessing the full-blown concept of a chair is *not* the same thing as possessing the 'image'. This is now clear, since we would not say of someone who could not produce the right answers to the right questions (even to such simple questions as 'what do people do with chairs?') that he had the full-blown concept, and possessing an *ability* is clearly a very different thing from possessing one image. (I do not mean that the operational procedure of asking questions and seeing if one gets linguistically appropriate responses is decisive for telling if someone has the full-blown concept. Someone might have the ability and fail to manifest it in the test situation for a variety of reasons, e.g. nervousness. But possession of the ability *is* at least a necessary condition for possession of the full-blown concept.)

We have also seen that possessing the full-blown concept is not a matter of possessing *further* images (say, images of the sentences, or even of whole discourses), since one could possess any system of images you please and not possess the *ability* to use sentences in situationally appropriate ways (considering both linguistic factors – what has been said before – and nonlinguistic factors as determining 'situational appropriateness'). A man may have all the images you please, and still be completely at a loss when one says to him 'point to a chair', even if a lot of chairs are present. He may even have the image of what he is supposed to do, and still not know what he is supposed to do. For the image, if not accompanied by the *practice* of acting in certain ways, or the *ability* to act in the appropriate way, is just a *picture*, and acting in accordance with a picture is itself an ability that one may or may not have. (The man might picture himself pointing to a chair, but just for the sake of contemplating something logically possible: himself pointing to a chair just after someone has produced the – to him meaningless – sequence of sounds 'please point to a chair'.) He would still not know

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that he was *supposed to point to a chair*, and he would still not *understand* 'point to a chair'.)

We have considered the ability to use certain sentences to be the criterion for possessing the full-blown concept, but this could easily be liberalized. We could allow symbolism consisting of elements which are not words in a natural language, for example, and we could allow such mental phenomena as images, and other types of internal events. What is essential is that these should have the same complexity, or be capable of having the same complexity, as sentences in a natural language. For, although a simple presentation – say, a blue flash – might serve a particular mathematician as the inner expression of the whole proof of the Prime Number Theorem, still, there would be no temptation to say this (and it would be ludicrously false to say this) if that mathematician could not 'unpack' his 'blue flash' into separate steps and logical connections. But, no matter what sort of inner phenomena we allow as possible *expressions* of thought, arguments exactly similar to the foregoing will indicate that it is not the phenomena themselves that constitute understanding, but rather the ability of the thinker to *employ* those phenomena, to produce the right phenomena in the right situations.

The foregoing is a very abbreviated version of Wittgenstein's argument in *Philosophical Investigations*. If it is correct, then the attempt to understand thought by what is called 'phenomenological' investigation (i.e. by introspection) is fundamentally misguided: for what the phenomenologists fail to see is that all they are doing is describing the inner *expression* of thought (which is an interesting and important task, to be sure); but that the *understanding* of that expression – one's understanding of one's own thoughts – is not an *occurrence* but an *ability*. Our earlier example of a man pretending to 'think in Japanese' (and deceiving a native Japanese telepath) already shows the futility of a phenomenological approach to the problem of *understanding*. For even if there is some introspectible quality which is present when and only when one *really* understands (this seems false on introspection, in fact); still that quality is only *correlated* with understanding, and it is still *logically* possible that the man fooling the Japanese telepath have that quality too and *still* not understand a word of Japanese.

On the other hand, consider the (logically possible) man who does not have any 'interior monologue' at all. He speaks perfectly good English, we will suppose, and if asked what his opinions are on a given subject, he will give them at length. But he never thinks (in words, images, etc.) when he is not speaking out loud; nor does anything 'go through his mind' when he speaks out loud, except that (of course) he hears his own

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voice speaking, and has the usual sense impressions from his surroundings, plus a general 'feeling of understanding'. Similarly, when he types a letter or goes to the store, etc., he is not having an internal 'stream of thought'; but his actions are intelligent and purposeful, and if anyone walks up and asks him 'what are you doing?' he will give perfectly coherent replies.

This man seems perfectly imaginable. No one would hesitate to say that he was conscious, understood language, disliked jazz (if he frequently expressed a strong aversion to jazz), etc., just because he did not think conscious thoughts except when speaking out loud.

What follows from all this is that (a) no set of mental events – images, or more 'abstract' mental happenings and qualities – *constitute* understanding; and (b) no set of mental events is *necessary* for understanding. In particular, *concepts cannot be identical with mental objects of any kind*. For, assuming that by a 'mental object' we understand something introspectible, we have just seen whatever it is, it may be imagined absent in a man who does understand the appropriate word (and hence has the full-blown concept), and present in a man who does not have the concept at all.

This is one of the most remarkable conclusions in the history of philosophy. For virtually no philosopher doubted, from the time of John Locke until roughly 1914, that, whatever concepts and ideas were, they were *clearly* mental objects of some kind. And no large-scale and comprehensive demolition job was done against this particularly widespread and influential philosophical misconception until Wittgenstein produced his *Philosophical Investigations* (which he finished in 1949, and which was not published until after his death, which occurred in 1951).

(We shall see later, however, that the turn away from Locke's 'way of Ideas', and from the concern with introspective psychology began long before the later Wittgenstein.)

Incidentally, even the minimal concept of a 'chair' cannot be an image. For an organism might conceivably have chair-images and not *discriminate* chairs (or even chair-images!). Indeed, something like this seems to happen in human infancy. To have even the minimal concept of *red*, for example, requires the formation of associations which are very difficult before the age of two. There is some evidence that the difficulty is physiological: that the association requires the use of paths connecting the tectum (the visual cortex) with other parts of the brain which are not fully mature until well past the age of two. On one theory, what this means is that the one-year-old child *sees* red (and may well have red images), but cannot *associate* to it. (This is discussed by Geschwind in a lengthy article in *Brain* published in 1965.) And,

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conversely, someone who never has visual images (and there are many such people), may perfectly well possess the ability to discriminate red objects. Thus minimal concepts are no more 'mental objects' than are full-blown concepts.

The foregoing discussion may be reinforced by the following consideration. How do we in fact decide whether or not someone possesses a concept? We do not look inside his stream of consciousness to see if the word corresponding to the concept evokes a particular mental image or event of some kind. We rather observe (and put questions, if necessary) to see if he *knows how to use the word*. And even if I want to see if I myself have grasped some concept or other, I do much the same thing: I *put questions to myself*, and see if I can answer them. Finding out that you have the concept *chair* is not discovering that the word calls up an image in your head (or some other sort of mental event); it is simply discovering that you possess a certain complicated *ability*.

The case becomes even clearer when we consider what it is to find out that two people have the *same* concept. It does not matter if you think in images and I do not, or how different the phenomena called up in your mind and in mine by the word 'chair' may be: if we both agree that a chair is a portable seat for one with a back; if we both agree on the function of chairs, and on their normal appearance; if we agree on what to class as a chair and what to class as a nonchair; then in an important sense we have exactly the same concept of a chair. But having the same concept, in this sense, is not having the same mental presentation, but having the same set of linguistic and nonlinguistic abilities in a certain respect.

In sum, the traditional account suggests that finding out that someone has a concept is finding out that he has a particular mental presentation, and finding out that two people have the same concept is finding out that they have identical mental presentations. But this is *ludicrously* false; not because it fails to correspond to what we in fact *do*, but because it fails to correspond to what we in fact *mean*. Part of what is attractive about the Wittgensteinian account of conceptualization (which I am sketching here) is this: that whereas on the traditional account it is quite mysterious that one can ever discover that another person has a concept, on the Wittgensteinian account the mystery disappears. For, if discovering that someone has a concept is discovering that someone has a certain ability, then it is clear how we can discover that someone has this: we can discover that someone has a certain ability by seeing him exhibit that ability. (Of course, this wouldn't satisfy the sceptic. But then nothing would. That's the nature of scepticism.)

At this point one begins to feel serious doubts about Moore's sharp

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distinction, mentioned above, between the *concept* Good and the *word*. Moore writes as if there were an *object*, 'the concept Good', that one could pass about, inspect under a microscope, perhaps take to pieces (be careful not to break it!). The word, on this view, is only a convenient if accidental label for this object. Once we have had our attention called to the object, we can simply forget about the word and concentrate on the object. But what is this object? It seems as if all we in fact have is the word, or rather the ability to use a system of sentences. We decide whether or not someone has the concept Good by seeing whether or not he has this ability; we decide whether or not two people have the same concept of goodness by seeing whether or not their usages are in certain respects similar. Was not Moore *in fact* discussing the way we use the word, even if he thought he wasn't?

Considerations of this sort lead naturally to the idea that a great deal of philosophy should be *reconstructed* as about language, even if the authors in question did not *think* they were talking about language. (In particular, all of the traditional philosophy about 'ideas', 'concepts', etc., to which we alluded earlier.)

Of course, the objection is immediately voiced that concepts are not the same thing as words, and so talk about concepts *can't* be really about words. But this is a silly objection. What is it to know what concepts *are*? Clearly, if someone knows under what circumstances someone *has* a concept, and is able to distinguish that concept from all concepts which are not identical with it, then he knows what that concept is. (Some philosophers have supposed that even if I know how to verify arithmetical statements, e.g. 'there are two primes between two and seven', and how to use number words in such statements as 'there are two apples in my pocket'; 'this equation has three roots'; 'give me two and one-half quarts of milk'; still, I haven't the foggiest notion what numbers *are*. And they suppose that philosophy must answer this question. But *don't I, in fact* know what the number two is? It's the first even prime; it's the second number in the sequence 1, 2, . . . ; it's the number of hands I've got. If *that* doesn't count as knowing what the number two is, why should anything a philosopher dreams up count any more?) If you can tell when someone has the concept 'equilateral triangle', and you know that, e.g. 'equilateral triangle' is not at all the *same* concept as 'scalene triangle', then don't you know what the concept 'equilateral triangle' is?

Concepts aren't words (although having a concept is being able to use certain words, or certain symbols, or certain 'inner notation' with at least as much potential complexity as sequences of words or symbols). Neither are concepts abilities; although *having* a concept is, or at least

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involves, having an ability. But this doesn't make concepts something mysterious.

What creates the appearance of mystery here is this. Many philosophers suppose that only certain kinds of things are *things* (sometimes the word 'entity', or the word 'object' is used instead of *thing*). For example, some philosophers suppose that only physical things are things, entities, objects, etc. It follows, for these philosophers, that *there are no such things* as concepts (or numbers, for that matter). Other philosophers use the words 'thing', 'entity', 'object', etc., to include concepts, properties, numbers, etc. For these philosophers, it is *trivial* that there are such things as concepts and numbers. Finally, some philosophers write as if it were an open question whether or not there are such entities as concepts and numbers. But how can this last view be correct? There is no clear and universally accepted notion of 'entity' to be appealed to here. Either the very explanation of the term resolves this question, or the question is hopelessly ill defined.

Discussing this question at length would, unfortunately, take us much too far afield. I should like, however, to suggest a view which I think provides a sane solution to the sort of problem just raised. This view, crudely put, is that different sets of statements (e.g. statements about people having or not having concepts versus statements about people having or not having the ability to employ certain sentences correctly; statements about numbers versus statements about classes of classes; etc.) may sometimes have the same cognitive content without being in any sense synonymous on a sentence-by-sentence basis. Even though we are very far from having any precise criterion for the 'sameness of cognitive content' of whole systems of statements, one can easily list cases in which it seems correct to say that two systems have the same cognitive content, and one can describe a number of the salient features of such cases. The most important feature is this: that there is some established procedure for passing back and forth between the two systems. This procedure must be such that it is immaterial, scientifically speaking, which system one adopts; all the purposes that can be served by the one way of speaking can equally well be served by the other.

Consider, for a moment, the example of numbers. Russell and Whitehead showed how to 'translate' all statements about numbers into statements about classes of classes. Some authors have argued that this proves that numbers *are* classes of classes (but this seems to be upset by the discovery of a plurality of equally workable but mutually incompatible 'translations'). Others have argued (on the grounds of 'simplicity' and 'economy') that we should 'dispense' with numbers and speak only of classes of classes. In its strong form, this last view holds