PART I

PROBLEMATICS OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

Introduction

On the Powers and Problematics of Language

In language we exercise immense powers of revelation and coordination. As a revealer, language models all the beings that are, were, or may be; we devise new expressions to discriminate as many different referents as we are capable of noticing, and we class things comparatively from as many points of view as our endlessly juxtaposable expressions suggest. As a coordinator, language directs a nuanced partnership of communicators living in that illuminated world.

These powers are known to be dangerous. Clumsily, carelessly, or all too efficiently, language can disastrously mislead. We learned early in life how seriously the danger is taken. Almost as soon as we were first coaxed to speak, we were warned that lying is intolerable. Then we were warned against exaggeration, unfounded generalization, repetition of the baseless or malicious statements of others, obscenity, cursing, and misplaced intimacy or levity. It became clear that the ethics, etiquette, and sheer technique of speaking and understanding rightly would be an intensely monitored lifetime study.

An utterance can have great consequences in a moment; for example, a passenger looking out for a driver trying to enter a busy highway can instantly cause multiple deaths by saying "You can go now." In comparison with a shove or a tap, the linguistic signal is loaded with understanding and pertinence. Word senses stretch our awareness across space and time: when I summon you with such ready authority by your instituted name or by the pronouns "you" and "we"; when I characterize a particular by implementing a concept ("Remember, we're in a Prius"); when I conditionalize ("A Prius can't accelerate fast enough in this situation"); when I quantify ("None of those drivers can see you"); or when I use

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tense to project into the past or future ("You won't be able to get on this road till rush hour is over").

One sort of maximum of linguistic power is on view when we use language to characterize everything characterizable ("Everything consists of energy") or to prescribe everything prescribable ("Act always for the greatest utility"). Such claims are contestable, of course, and even when accepted leave plenty of room to settle specific issues in different ways. But our ability to deploy such comprehensive frames for life-in-the-world forces us to consider and discuss how claims on that scale could be valid.

Another linguistic power affects relationships, sometimes creatively and sometimes destructively. The commitment expression "I love you" is notable for making all of the speaker's important evaluations and decisions revolve henceforth around the addressee, who is now irrevocably connected to the loving "I" as its "you." It will be a challenge to *substantiate* this expression – but it *can* be substantiated, and our awareness of this possibility makes the utterance of the words a major event. Much harder to substantiate but breathtaking in its presumption is "God damn you!" which paradoxically negates all communion.

We constantly face problems in determining when linguistic acts are acceptable. There is possible abuse of language in making assertions that are false or not appropriately grounded or connected, or in giving orders that are not helpful or not authorized. And there is a possibility of pushing language too hard, making assertions with sketchy or obnoxious entailments. (Let us confess that we do such things frequently, seeing what we can get away with.) To address the problems in each area methodically, it helps to recognize a whole *problematic* of speaking and understanding rightly in each kind of case.

The problematic of truth, for example, involves an array of situations and a history of cases in which debatable lines have been drawn or still need to be drawn between sense and lack of sense, accuracy and inaccuracy, adequacy and inadequacy of disclosure, or the relevant respect and lack of respect among interlocutors. So long as we are enmeshed in such a problematic, we get a sense of orientation from a regulating ideal such as truthfulness. The ideal is an attractor in our problematized practice: we do not always know what truthfulness will involve, and we will disagree about the specimens and standards, but we have a sense of what we are after – a useful, benign, reliable sharing of information about life-in-the-world among all communicating colleagues. We may take what seems to be a tenable general position with respect to this ideal, like "Assert only what you know by direct observation." In the second-order truth

problematic of philosophy, we try out specifications of the ideal to orient the explanation and justification of truth claims generally (*adaequatio intellectus et rei*, warranted assertibility), hoping to ground it in a tenable comprehensive position (realism, pragmatism).

Communicative action might therefore be characterized as our exploration of a field of ideally regulated communicative problematics. We are always grappling with problems when we speak and understand, but we are never clueless about what the relevant problems are or what might be a tolerable approximation of a solution.

A premise of the present study is that there is a significant overlap between the ideals at the heart of two problematics of utterance that may seem remote from each other: the perfectly general problematic of everyday communication, in which all humans are enmeshed just by virtue of living humanly, and the intensely special problematic of taking direction from a text of paramount religious authority – a text that will virtually always be placed in its own exalted category as "scripture," "Veda," or "classic" (*jing*) – which seems to concern only members of voluntary religious communities. ("Scripture" is the most commonly used general term for such texts and will be used in this sense henceforth.)[1] One indication of the connection is the inescapable relevance of the idea of "the guidance" in explaining each problematic: what language use is always supposed to do is provide guidance, more particularly *the* applicable guidance to subject matter and performance at each juncture of communication; what scripture is distinctively supposed to do is provide the supremely relevant guidance (the Guidance) for the ultimate goal of optimizing human life.

The connection involves also a reciprocal dependence. Scriptural guidance is one of the ultimate tests of ordinary guidance insofar as it serves, whether by design or as the result of an evolution of textual guidance, as a distillation and maximally heightened emphasis of the ideals in the general communicative problematic. In Christian scripture, for instance, a "father of lies" character, Satan, intensely emphasizes the negative side of the ideal of truth telling, and the assertion that "God is love" (comparable to dramatizations of infinite compassion in Buddhist scriptures) intensely emphasizes the moral ideal of interpersonal solidarity.[2] If this religious visioning makes sense, the ordinary ideals it assumes make all the more

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[1] On "scripture" as a cross-cultural category, see Section 5.4.
[2] Satan as "father of lies," John 8:44; "God is love," 1 John 4:8; infinite compassion, e.g., Greater Pure Land Sutra 7 (Dharmakara/Amitabha's vows).

sense; if it does not, the ordinary ideals are weaker. On the other side of the dependence, we can tell that scriptural guidance has gone off the rails when we notice ordinary communicative failures – as in a mystifying esotericism or a bullying fanaticism. We cannot defend positions within scripture's own problematic without relying on procedures we use within the general problematic of linguistic action.

There is an *aleph, bet* argument associated with Hillel and others to the effect that it could not make sense to reject the guidance of a scripture given that all of us have already accepted the direction of an existing language and tradition on which we are fundamentally dependent.[3] While this is obviously no proof of scriptural authority or value, it does serve as a useful reminder that the teleology of scripturalism is entangled with the teleology of linguistic communication more generally wherever we can assume broad literacy.

I propose to make the most of a two-sided continuity thesis relating scriptural guidance to linguistic guidance in general. This thesis disagrees with those who make the strongest devout claims for the incomparable properties of scriptural guidance and also with those who completely deny scripture's ideal relevance. According to the first part of the thesis, the vaulting ambition of scriptural guidance fails if it violates basic norms of regular linguistic guidance; this seems to me a sound, commonsensical approach to determining what reasonable scripturalism does and does not involve. The less commonsensical second part of the thesis affirms a corresponding dependence of the terms of regular guidance on their scriptural amplifications.

The chief evaluative question I wish to raise is this: Under what conditions does the idea of Scripture (supreme Guidance in a paramount Text) make generally appreciable sense?

Religious scripturalists will answer this question variously, according to conceptions of scripture supported by their traditions; they may even disagree with their coreligionists about how to take scripture and whether to adopt a scripturalist style of religiosity. Relatively detached observers of scripture's place in our world will answer variously as well. On a negative view, scriptural guidance may be seen as false in substance (if it is supernaturalistic), epistemically treacherous (if it relies on myth or demands faith), and culturally and ethically pernicious (if it

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[3] See Section 6.2. On the Hillel story, see Steven D. Fraade, "Concepts of Scripture in Rabbinic Judaism: Oral Torah and Written Torah," in *Jewish Concepts of Scripture* (ed. Benjamin Sommer, NYU Press, 2012), pp. 34–36.

is ethnocentric or sexist). One may judge historically that the most important reason that a scripture exists and the prime determinant of its content and application is the domination project of a social elite. Thus the "insights" and "values" we may continue to glean from scripture are incidental: nothing about the general process of generating or using scriptures warrants trust in scriptural guidance. On a positive view, however, scripture generally is or can be of compelling intellectual and spiritual value to its readers – a classic, in effect, perhaps of a more potent kind than literary classics as such – and of great coordinating help to communities both synchronically and diachronically – a constitution, in effect, perhaps of a more potent kind than a political constitution, given that distinctively advantageous promptings and selections of utterances have occurred in the process of generating and using scriptures. (One can take this positive view without being a devout scripturalist.) Finally, taking all these possibilities into account, a neutral view would allow that scripture can be harmful, harmless, or helpful depending on its particular forms, contexts, and uses.

How one sees the ideal relevance of scripture will probably be tied to one's historical view of scripture's prospects for continuing to exert influence. One may judge that scripture plays an enduring key role in the ecology of human guidance, in principle and perhaps demonstrably in living cultures; or that scripture has effectively been replaced by other kinds of great Text; or that the age of literacy ruled by Texts is giving way to a different communicative regime altogether. Or one may reject the premise that scripture or literacy have in fact been as culturally dominant as they are usually supposed to have been. In any case, it will be hard to separate ideal from historical assessments.

In the spirit of my suggestion that the sense of ordinary communicative guidance can be seen as dependent on scriptural guidance, a turn-the-tables question worth asking is this: How could life in a literate civilization make sufficient sense *without* scripture? If it is granted that we receive crucial guidance from utterances (a point to be developed in Chapter 1); that we rely on specially amplified modes of guiding utterance, including religious discourse (Chapter 2); that with writing we can publish refined packages of guidance for endless application and reconsideration, our greatest texts hitting a maximum of guidance utility (Chapter 3); and that our most ambitious language can have guiding value despite its inadequacy in representing the ultimate reference of guidance (Chapter 4) – granting these features of our communicative scene, can the ideal relevance of the category of scripture and thus

potentially of a particular scripture be denied without denying the human project of optimizing guidance?

There are appreciable motives for denying the project of optimizing guidance. One may wish to live more independently. One may fear human overreaching. But these motives become reasons only if one engages in reasoning, which is, among other things, a guidance-optimizing activity. From the perspective of reasoners, one either joins in this activity or stays outside it like a barbarian beyond the gates. If we *are* engaged in reasoning and are reflecting seriously upon it, then it seems we are obliged to consider the maximally ambitious scriptural way of establishing guidance and to try to determine which positions we ought to take in negotiating scripture's internal sense-making problematic, on the one hand, and the external problematic of its proper place in our world, on the other.

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For religious studies purposes, there are compelling reasons to define scripture generically as Guidance. These will be discussed when we turn our attention to the problematic of scripture in Part II, having worked our way up to that supposed maximum of powerful guidance by examining in Part I the main typical ways in which guidance is achieved in utterance.

On the side of philosophy of language, a focus on guidance in communicative action is advantageous even beyond bringing out relations between ordinary and scriptural language use. There are of course good reasons to focus on the representational or expressive elements of language, or on signification or symbolization, or on information transfer, or even on subjective experience. But asking how language use accomplishes guidance is deeply and extensively revealing. Among the best-known major programs in the philosophy of language, one sees the power of the guidance question best, I think, in Wittgenstein and Habermas – although Wittgenstein's explicit discussions of guidance tend to resolve it into the ultrabasic phenomenon of "agreement,"[4] and Habermas's linguistic pragmatics is geared toward free individuals' pursuit of shared understanding rather than toward an optimal relationship between

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[4] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Macmillan, 1958), §§138–243, pp. 53–88; see also *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, rev. ed., ed. G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees, and G. E. M. Anscombe, parts VI and VII, pp. 303–437.

guided and guide.[5] Remarkably, it seems that no one has yet been prompted by the profound communicative interdependence of humans to look carefully at the common human interest in guidance as a determinant of the concept. "Beliefs about what words mean guide how to use those words … beliefs about the content of thinking guide what inferences to draw … Thoughts about meaning guide our use of language" (Allan Gibbard).[6] What is this "guiding"? Well – what do we want guiding to be? Let us see how things look when we are guided by that question.

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[5] Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1 (trans. Thomas McCarthy, Beacon, 1984), chap. 3, pp. 273–337; see also "What Is Universal Pragmatics?" in *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (trans. Thomas McCarthy, Beacon, 1979), pp. 1–68.

[6] Allan Gibbard, *Meaning and Normativity* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 238.

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The Guidance Problematic

When I say to myself: "But I *am* guided" – I make perhaps a movement with my hand, which expresses guiding. – Ludwig Wittgenstein[1]

1.1 ORIENTED AND GUIDED: THE GIVEN SITUATION

Humans are intensely communicative and interdependent, and language is obviously an indispensable human "guidance system." But what does that claim mean in depth? As guided beings and guidance-scrutinizing beings, what are we doing?

Let us try first to sound out the basic practicality of the guidance situation. We can start with a double question of orientation that applies to anyone simply as a movable being: Of all the beings in the world, which do I address, and which might I address? The word "address" already takes a position in the basic problematic of orientation, implying a possible stability in relations.

We see the rudiments of addressing in how two mountains address each other across a valley. There is even a sense in which mountains can have something at stake in the way they address each other, an interest, if their erosion patterns are affected by their channeling of weather. But we are reluctant to attribute that sort of practicality to nonliving beings. Their nature is just to be the result of whatever happens.

Self-moving beings are another story because they have their own programs of addressing. For example, a sunflower follows the sun across the sky. One might like to interpret the sunflower's movement as a

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[1] *Philosophical Investigations* §178.

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mechanical process of the same kind as weather passing through a valley, but the self-maintaining structural integrity of the sunflower is such that the "process" of its movement is properly conceived as its *action*, and its evolutionary history is such that its action is properly conceived as purposive. Over time, the sunflower species is enmeshed in a problematic of survivable orientation. Each living sunflower actively assumes the successful position that the species has hit upon within that problematic.

Building up the biology of orientation, we have yet another kind of case when a pollinating bee darts into flowers of a certain shape, color, and scent. Here it is not too great a stretch to say that a being's orientation is established by its elective response to the perceived appeal of another being. The bee notices and becomes interested in the flower. But something more than an instantaneous appeal-orientation has been established. The relation between the bee and the flower develops in a structured way through the bee's actions and the flower's affordances so that it seems appropriate to say that the flower *guides* the bee. The flower's guidance of the bee is the diachronic practicality of its appeal; it is how the flower's promise of shared advantage is implemented productively.

Does the flower really guide the bee, or is there only a vague analogy between the flower-bee interaction and guidance proper as found among rational agents? One might be pulled one way or another on this question depending on one's intuitions about naturalism and reason, but the answer may not matter. Whether we prefer to say that there is a natural phenomenon of guidance exemplified by bees in bee fashion and by people in rational fashion or to say instead that bees exemplify some biological preconditions of guidance, while people alone exemplify guidance proper – either way, there is an important continuity between these cases that will have to be taken into account in ascertaining what the most practically meaningful examples of guidance involve. For it undeniably belongs to our animal condition that we depend on cues from other beings and consistencies in our interactions with them to live successfully. The human experience of "relationship" and practical "knowledge" is based on this relatedness. One could not carry on a human conversation if one did not possess beelike perceptual and motor responsiveness and if one's interlocutor did not provide a flowerlike structuring of the situation. One had best be aware that one's prospects for successful life can be affected favorably or unfavorably by changes in these dimensions of the interactive situation.