

I

Introduction

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Contemporary historians of philosophy write in a philosophical culture in which the analysis of language has been given a dominant position. It now seems quite natural to pursue questions which were once treated as those of metaphysics, say, or the philosophy of mind as lying rather within the philosophy of language. Instead of asking whether there are private mental states or events such as sensations, one asks whether there could be a private language; instead of asking whether there are numbers, one asks whether every mathematical statement must be true or false; instead of asking whether there are events and what sort of thing they are, we investigate the logical form of action sentences and determine the ontological commitments of our talk about the things that happen. The hope is that, as Donald Davidson says, in 'making manifest the large features of our language, we make manifest the large features of reality'.¹

This approach to philosophical enquiry is, of course, characteristic of what has come to be called 'analytical philosophy', and its motivation can itself perhaps be seen to rest on a particular view of language. So, if we follow Michael Dummett, we will take the distinguishing feature of analytical philosophy to be its giving language explanatory priority over thought.² According to Dummett, three theses are essential for the analytical philosopher: '(i) an account of language does not presuppose an account of thought, (ii) an account of language yields an account of thought, and (iii) there is no other adequate means by which an account of thought may be given'.³ The analytical philosopher proceeds by analysing language because, on this view, it is only by means of such analysis that one will be

¹ Davidson [483], 199. Not all who have taken 'the linguistic turn' have shared Davidson's own claim that 'in sharing a language . . . we share a picture of the world that must, in its large features, be true'.

² For a brief discussion of what motivates this, see the first section of ch. 5 below.

³ Dummett [487], 39.

2 *Stephen Everson*

able to analyse thought itself. On this account, analytical philosophy rests on a thesis *about* the nature of language – that linguistic meaning is not to be explained in terms of its standing as a code for thoughts which have their content independently of their having linguistic expression.

If Dummett is correct in his characterisation of analytical philosophy, then it is a relatively recent philosophical development.⁴ Certainly, there is no ancient philosopher who explicitly espouses anything like Dummett's three analytical principles, and most of the ancients would deny at least the first of them. Nevertheless, there is an important strand in ancient theorising about language in which words are taken to have their semantic properties independently of their functioning as signs of thoughts and according to which the analysis of language is a precondition at least for being able to say true things about the world. This strand is most perspicuous in Plato's *Cratylus* (*Crat.*), in which Socrates, Hermogenes and the Heraclitean Cratylus are represented as debating whether names are merely conventional or have a natural standard of correctness. Cratylus adopts a strenuously naturalistic position: 'he says that [names] are natural and not conventional – not a portion of the human voice which men agree to use – but that there is a truth or correctness in them, which is the same for Hellenes as for Barbarians' (*Crat.* 383a). Hermogenes, in contrast, argues for a conventionalist theory:

Any name which you give, in my opinion, is the right one, and if you change that and give another, then the new name is as correct as the old . . . For there is no name given to anything by nature, all is convention and habit of the users. (384d)⁵

This, however, is challenged by Socrates, who asks Hermogenes to consider what sort of skill (*technē*) is required for assigning names:

Then, as to names, ought not our legislator also to know how to put the true natural name of each thing into sounds and syllables, and to make and give all names with a view to the ideal name, if he is to be a namer in any true sense? . . . Then, Hermogenes, I should say that this giving of names can be no such light matter as you fancy, or the work of light or chance persons. And Cratylus is right in saying that things have names by nature, and that not every man is an artificer of names, but he only who looks to the name which each thing by nature has, and is able to express the true forms of things in letters and syllables. (389d; 390d)

⁴ Dummett describes Frege as the 'grandfather' of analytical philosophy – [487], 60–1, [488], 196. For doubts about Dummett's characterisation of analytical philosophy, see Cohen [480], ch. 1.

⁵ Jowett's translation, from [96].

Having established at *Crat.* 386d that things 'must be supposed to have their own permanent essence (*ousia*)', Socrates presents the task of whoever assigns names to be to capture that essence. If a name is to be correct, then it must somehow reflect what it refers to: what it is to be that thing must be expressed in the name assigned to it. On Cratylus' view, what is required of a name, if it is to fulfil that function, is that it should stand as some sort of likeness of what it refers to. Socrates has little problem in showing that this is not a satisfactory position⁶ and the dialogue ends aporetically, without Hermogenes' question having received an answer.

Although Cratylus' brand of linguistic naturalism is not one which will be attractive to contemporary readers – as it was not to Plato – the thesis is not without its interest.⁷ For one thing, it provides an early attempt to explain how language is meaningful without seeing it simply as a code for thought.⁸ Secondly, it is representative, in a somewhat extreme form, of a more general sophistic concern with determining standards of correctness for language. So, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Protagoras is credited with originating *orthoepeia*, 'correct diction' (267c), and both he and Prodicus are reported in the *Cratylus* as being concerned with *orthotēs onomatōn*, 'the correctness of names'.⁹ Our evidence for how either of these sought to determine the correctness of words is slight, and there is no reason to believe that they shared Cratylus' belief in a natural correctness secured by a likeness between a word and what it refers to. Nevertheless, Protagoras is cited in the *Cratylus* as someone who had put forward claims as to what constituted the natural standard for linguistic correctness – but we are not told what he took that standard to be. Even if he would not have subscribed to Cratylus' particular way of determining linguistic correctness, it would seem that any theorist who maintained that there are standards for correctness which are independent of conventional usage would have to accept something like Socrates' version of the name-giver's task.

What the naturalist was looking for was a language which is fit for the description of the world – which is such as to be used to say things about the world without imprecision. The importance of this goal could be recognised without the commitment to naturalism, however. Correct speech – that is, linguistic precision – can, of course, be achieved without the aid of words

⁶ See Bernard Williams' chapter below.

⁷ Discussion of other varieties of linguistic naturalism can be found in chs 5 and 9 below, pp. 91 f. and 167 f.

⁸ Compare Dummett on Frege: 'His semantic theory made no appeal to an antecedent conception of thoughts . . . that is why [he] is regarded as the grandfather of analytic philosophy' [488], 196. At least in this, Frege was not without his predecessors.

⁹ See Kerferd [66], ch. 7 for a useful introduction to sophistic linguistic speculation.

4 *Stephen Everson*

whose structure somehow reflects the form of what they refer to.¹⁰ Prodicus' method for achieving *onomatōn orthotēs* was to provide careful distinctions either between words which might easily be taken to be synonyms or between different senses of the same word. So, in the *Protagoras* (*Prot.*) Prodicus is represented as distinguishing between attending to the speakers in a discussion impartially and attending to them equally: 'the two things are not the same: they must hear both alike, but not give equal weight to each. More should be given to the wiser, and less to the other.' He then encourages Protagoras and Socrates to engage in a discussion rather than a dispute (the former is between friends, the latter between rivals) so that they will earn esteem rather than praise (praise can be fake, whereas esteem cannot) and produce enjoyment (*euphrainesthai*) in their audience rather than pleasure (*hēdesthai*) – pleasure is restricted to bodily activities, whereas enjoyment is not.¹¹

The passage is ironical: Prodicus is depicted as being unable to say anything without contrasting it with something else. In the *Charmides*, Socrates complains about the 'endless distinctions which Prodicus draws about names' (163e). In this case, however, we are likely to side with the target of Plato's irony rather than with Plato himself. In however jejune a fashion (and we have little evidence which is independent of Plato to judge him on this), Prodicus was pursuing a project which has been characteristic of philosophy to this day – that of trying to get clear what our words mean in order that we do not create unnecessary confusion when we use them to describe the nature of things.

Socrates follows his jibe in the *Charmides* by saying that he has 'no objection to your giving names any signification which you please, if you will only tell me to what you apply them'. It might be tempting to see in this a forerunner of the sort of complaint which was made against what was called 'ordinary-language philosophy' – that too much effort was spent analysing the intricacies of idiomatic usage and too little actually in using language to reflect on the nature of things. There is indeed in Plato a move from linguistic analysis to more straightforward metaphysical speculation, but his own work, as well as that of Aristotle and the philosophers who followed him, shows a recognition that one cannot properly engage in such speculation without simultaneously subjecting the language one uses to critical scrutiny. It is more than likely that Prodicus applied his method with too much zeal, and no doubt with insufficient depth, but that method imposed a discipline on philosophical argument without which it could not have achieved even the success it has.

¹⁰ For Hellenistic discussions of this issue, see R. J. Hankinson's essay, ch. 9 below.

¹¹ *Prot.* 337a–c [= D–K 84A13].

For one does not have to accept any particular thesis about the relation between language and thought to recognise that linguistic confusion breeds bad philosophy. It is not only analytical philosophers who (should) recognise the importance of analysing the words we use to express our thoughts and to say things about the world. In truth, both 'analytical' philosophers and philosophers of other kinds are likely to concern themselves with questions about the meaning of words and with questions about the nature of what those words refer to. Any difference is likely to be mostly a matter of emphasis.¹² So, when Davidson, in the paper cited earlier,¹³ describes and defends the project of pursuing metaphysics by studying 'the general structure of our language', he acknowledges that that project is not a novel one:

This is not, of course, the sole true method of metaphysics; there is no such. But it is one method, and it has been practised by philosophers as widely separated by time or doctrine as Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Russell, Frege, Wittgenstein, Carnap, Quine and Strawson. These philosophers have not, it goes without saying, agreed on what the large features of language are, or on how they may be best studied and described; the metaphysical conclusions have in consequence been various.¹⁴

It may be that analytical philosophers have particular theoretical reason for the pursuit of metaphysics by means of the analysis of language, but nevertheless, as Davidson says, that pursuit is one in which philosophers have been engaged since antiquity.

Parmenides' arguments against plurality and change, for instance, provide an early example of a philosopher's drawing metaphysical conclusions from claims about language. 'What is said and thought must needs be', he states in fr. 6, and then, in fr. 8, he employs this principle to draw very bold conclusions:¹⁵

It never was nor will be, since it is now, all together, one, continuous. For what birth will you seek for it? How and whence did it grow? I shall not allow you to say nor to think from not being for it is not to be said nor thought that it is not; and what need would have driven it later rather than earlier, beginning from the nothing, to grow? Thus it must be either completely or not at all. (fr. 8, 5-11)¹⁶

¹² See Cohen [480], ch. 1, for the application of this to analytical philosophy.

¹³ See above, n. 1. ¹⁴ Davidson [483], 199.

¹⁵ The idea that a word must refer if it is to be meaningful is one which plays a key role in much early Greek theorising about language, and was used, for instance, to support the striking claim that falsehood was impossible. See Denyer [22] for a study of this issue.

¹⁶ The translations are from Kirk, Raven and Schofield [43].

6 *Stephen Everson*

From the claim that what is non-existent is both unthinkable and unspeakable Parmenides infers that what exists must always have existed, since to say that it came into being would require saying that it came into being from nothing, and this would require what is impossible – speaking of the non-existent.¹⁷

Plato, too, moves from claims about language to strong metaphysical conclusions. As David Bostock argues below, at least part of Plato's motivation for positing Forms was in order to explain our ability to understand such terms as 'good', 'just' and 'large'.¹⁸ To understand 'good', for instance, one must know what it is for something to be good, and this is not knowledge which could be obtained merely empirically.¹⁹ The explanation of our linguistic abilities is taken to require an account of concept-possession, and this, in its turn, requires a particular theory of the world which will allow the subject to acquire the concepts needed for the understanding of language. Unless there were Forms of goodness and beauty, perfect exemplars of those properties, one would not be able to understand the terms 'good' and 'beautiful'.

The theory of Forms is rejected by Aristotle, who is duly attentive to the dangers posed by insufficient attention to the details of linguistic usage. So, in his attack on the Form of the good, in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN*), he objects that Plato's theory rests on a false assumption of the unity of goods:

Further, since things are said to be good in as many ways as they are said to be (for things are called both in the category of substance, as God and reason, and in quality, e.g. the virtues, and in quantity, e.g. that which is moderate, and in relation, e.g. the useful, and in time, e.g. the right opportunity, and in place, e.g. the right locality and the like), clearly the good cannot be something universally present in all cases and single; for then it would not have been predicated in all the categories but in one only. (*EN* 1.6. 1096a25–8)²⁰

Aristotle's diagnosis of Plato's error is, in essence, that he was misled by linguistic appearances: whilst the same term ('good', *agathon*) is used whenever we describe something as good, in fact the things to which we can apply the term differ so widely that it is not sensible to think of there being a single property which they all share and in virtue of which they can be

¹⁷ For discussion of Parmenides' use of the verb *einai*, 'to be', see Lesley Brown, ch. 11 below and also Barnes [40], 1, 157–72. ¹⁸ See ch. 2 below.

¹⁹ In ch. 7 below, David K. Glidden discusses the problems raised by the sceptics over linguistic understanding.

²⁰ (Ross/Urmson translation from [230]). Note that what is to be predicated here is the good and not the term 'the good'. For some remarks on predication in Aristotle, see Michael Frede's chapter below, pp. 114 f.

described as good. Aristotle moves in this chapter, as so often, between questions about how words are used and questions about what the words are used to describe.²¹ His opening question in the corresponding chapter in the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*) is, appropriately, 'We must then examine what is the best, and in how many senses we use the word' (*EE* 1.8.1217b1). Aristotle was not an analytical philosopher, at least in Dummett's sense. He did not articulate the ambition to give a theory of thought *by* providing an analysis of language, and took language to work because sounds can function as 'symbols' or 'signs' of thoughts.²² Nevertheless, the fact that we are able to communicate our thoughts linguistically ensures the importance of being clear about what we are saying.

For Aristotle, the ability to express our thoughts to one another is part of what makes us human. So when, in book 1 of the *Politics*, he presents his argument for the claim that humans are by nature political animals, part of that argument rests on the human capacity for language:

Now, that man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animals is evident. Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal who has the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure and pain, and is therefore found in other animals (for their nature attains to the perception of pleasure and pain and the intimation of them to one another and no further) the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and the inexpedient, and likewise therefore the just and the unjust. (*Politics* 1.2)

For Aristotle, the sign of man's distinctiveness as a political animal is that only humans are capable of speech (*logos*). The ability to communicate thoughts, rather than merely to express pleasure and pain, is something which sets humans apart from other animals.

Aristotle himself does not provide any sustained discussion of the relation between language and thought. Both at the start of the *Metaphysics* (*Met.*) and at the end of the *Posterior Analytics* (*An. Post.*), he discusses the differences in the cognitive abilities of humans and animals, but does not proceed to consider how these are related to what secures the ability to communicate linguistically. Nevertheless, there is in Aristotle at least the

²¹ Cf. 1096b27 f.: 'But in what way are things called good? They do not seem to be like the things that only chance to have the same name. Are goods one, then, by being derived from one good or by all contributing to one good, or are they rather one by analogy?'

²² Cf. *de Interpretatione* (*Int.*) 1.16a3 ff. What spoken sounds are said to be symbols of are 'affections of the soul (*psuchē*)' – but it seems from what follows that these are thoughts, *noēmata*: 'just as some thoughts in the *psuchē* are neither true nor false while some are necessarily one or the other, so also with spoken sounds' (*Int.* 116a9–11). The passage is discussed by David Charles in ch. 4 below, as well as in ch. 5, pp. 90–1 f. For Augustine's treatment of words as signs, see ch. 10.

8 *Stephen Everson*

material for an account of what sort of psychology is required for a creature to use and understand a language, as well as the beginnings of an answer to the question which must lie at the centre of philosophical speculation about language: how is it that sets of marks or sounds can have significance? Just as the theorist will be concerned to show what is required of a creature for it to be a *speaker* of a language, so he will also be concerned to show what is necessary for sounds (and marks) to be able to be used as (part of) a language. We communicate linguistically by uttering sounds and making signs, and it needs to be determined what constraints there are on the sounds and signs we produce if our production of them is indeed to function as linguistic behaviour. The animals in *Politics* I are caused to make sounds because they are in pain, but such sounds are not linguistic, even if, it seems, they have a communicative function.

For the Stoics also, animals are not capable of speech since they are not capable of thought: 'They say that it is not uttered speech but internal speech by which man differs from non-rational animals; for crows and parrots and jays utter articulate sounds.'²³ The consequence of this is that animal utterances are, strictly speaking, not linguistic at all:

An animal's utterance (*phōnē*) is air that has been struck by an impulse, but that of man is articulated and issues from thought (*dianoia*) . . . Utterance (*phōnē*) and speech (*lexis*) are different, because vocal sound is also an utterance, but only articulated sound is speech (*logos*). And speech is different from language because language is always significant (*sēmantikos*), but speech can lack significance, e.g. '*blituri*', whereas language is not like this at all.²⁴ (Diogenes Laertius (D.L.) VII.55; 57 = LS 33H; 33A)²⁵

Earlier in Diogenes' report of Stoic doctrine, we find the claim that 'thought (*dianoia*), which has the power of talking, expresses in language (*logos*) what it undergoes (*paschei*) by the agency of the perception' (VII.49 = LS 33D).

Whereas Aristotle's account of the relation between thought and language is schematic, the Stoics provided a much more systematic treatment of the matter, introducing propositional items, *lekta*, to mediate between the two. In *adversus Mathematicos* (M) VIII, Sextus Empiricus contrasts Stoic with Epicurean doctrine. Whereas Epicurus allowed only words and objects, the Stoics postulated three items; words, objects and *lekta*:

three things are linked together, the 'signification', the 'signifier' and the 'name-bearer'. The signifier is an utterance, for instance 'Dion'; the signification is the actual state of affairs revealed by an utterance, and

²³ Sextus Empiricus, *adversus Mathematicos* (M) VIII.275 = LS 53T.

²⁴ Presumably, the Stoics' attention here is focused on the sounds which animals make naturally, without being trained.

²⁵ 'LS' indicates a reference to Long and Sedley [308].

which we apprehend as it subsists in accordance with our thought, whereas it is not understood by those whose language is different although they hear the utterance; the name-bearer is the external object, for instance, Dion himself. Of these, two are bodies – the utterance and the name-bearer, but one is incorporeal – the state of affairs signified and sayable (*lekton*), which is true or false. (M VIII.11–12 = LS 33B)

When someone speaks, what is true or false is not the set of sounds he makes but rather what is said in making the utterance. This is the *lekton*, which also stands as the content of the speaker's psychological state.²⁶ Whilst there is at least an apparent problem in Aristotle's theory over why those animals which are capable of memory should not be able to express the content of their perceptions linguistically, the Stoics avoid this by distinguishing between the psychological states of rational animals, whose content can be linguistically articulated, and those of irrational animals. For the Stoics, what is required if an animal is to possess a language is the ability to have mental states with content. As long as an animal is a rational animal, even its perceptions will have content which is linguistically expressible²⁷ – and, as we have seen, the content of a speaker's intentional states is prior to the content of the utterances he makes in expressing them. Utterances can have content only because mental states do.

Ancient philosophers, then, like their modern successors, were concerned to answer various sorts of question in their study of language. At the most basic level, they attempted to provide an analysis of the structure of language – to distinguish between subjects and predicates, nouns and sentences, and so on²⁸ – and to clarify the meaning of individual expressions. Secondly, they set out to give accounts of how it is that sounds and marks can be meaningful. Thirdly, they dealt with the question of how a speaker can come to understand a language. In answering all of these, the study of language could not be dissociated from questions to do with the nature of the mind and the world. Even if the ancients did not share the presuppositions of the contemporary analytical philosopher, neither their interests in the explanation of language nor their methods of general philosophical enquiry will prove alien to those brought up to take those presuppositions almost for granted.

²⁶ See Michael Frede, ch. 6 below, for a systematic discussion of the Stoic theory of *lekta*. The implications of the Sextus passage for the understanding of Epicurus are reviewed in ch. 5, pp. 84 f.

²⁷ This is not to imply that Aristotle thought either that perceptions do not have content or that one cannot express that content in language. What is at least initially puzzling on his account is, given this, why one needs a high-level faculty such as *nous* in order to speak a language at all.

²⁸ David Blank, in ch. 8, describes the relation between philosophy and grammar in the Hellenistic period.

2

Plato on understanding language

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In Plato's early dialogues Socrates is portrayed as specially concerned with questions of ethics, and in particular with the concepts of goodness, virtue, courage, justice, temperance, piety, and so on. He perpetually asks what these things *are*, thinking that if we cannot say what they are then we will not know how to set about pursuing them, and therefore will not know how we ought to live. But also, in those early dialogues, Socrates is regularly shown as unable to find any satisfactory answers to his 'what is *x*?' questions. Although there are many who think that they can say, for example, what virtue is, on investigation their answers all turn out to be mistaken in one way or another, and no correct answer ever emerges. It is perhaps not completely clear what Socrates *would* have counted as a correct answer to one of his 'what is *x*?' questions, but at least there is no doubt about this: the question asks for some description or account of the *one* thing that is common to all the *many* instances, examples or cases of *x*, and it is not to be answered just by giving a list of such examples. This one thing that is common to all the many examples Plato came to call the Form of *x* (*eidos*, *idea*), or 'the thing that *x* itself is' (*auto ho esti x*), and he evidently thought that it was crucially important to be able to provide a suitable account of it.

Now some 'what is *x*?' questions appear simple enough to handle. For example, the question 'what is quickness?' can be answered by saying that quickness is doing a lot in a little time (*Laches* 192a–b), the question 'what is shape?' can be answered by saying that shape is the limit of a solid (*Meno* 76a), and Plato evidently supposes – rather to our surprise – that there would be no particular difficulty in finding an adequate answer to the question 'what is a bee?' (*Meno* 72b–c). But the cases that actually concerned him seemed very much more difficult, and Plato must, I think, have asked himself why this is. What makes the difference between a question such as 'what is shape?', which we can answer readily enough, and a question such as 'what is virtue?', which defeats all our efforts? Why is