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978-0-521-63997-2 - Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma

Ernest Gellner

Excerpt

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*Part I*

The Habsburg dilemma

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## 1 Swing alone or swing together

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There are two fundamental theories of knowledge. These two theories stand in stark contrast to each other. They are profoundly opposed. They represent two poles of looking, not merely at knowledge, but at human life. Aligned with these two polar views of knowledge, there are also related, and similarly contrasted, theories of society, of man, of everything. This chasm cuts right across our total social landscape.

In order to seize the gist of this deep and general confrontation, it is perhaps best to begin with knowledge. In this field the contrast is particularly stark and has a sharp profile.

There is, first of all, what one might call the individualistic/atomistic conception of knowledge. Knowledge, on this view, is something practised or achieved above all by *individuals* alone: if more than one person is involved, and collaboration takes place, this does not really modify the essence of the activity or of the achievement. In principle, the acquisition of knowledge is something open to Robinson Crusoe, and perhaps to him especially. It is our suggestibility and gullibility, especially in youth, perhaps our desire to please and conform, which above all leads us into error. We discover truth alone, we err in groups.

Crusoe's isolation saves him from following a multitude to commit folly. He is spared the worst temptation to err – conformism. Mutual aid may advance an inquiry, but it does not affect its character. Knowledge is a relationship between an individual and nature. Society, its hierarchy and its customs may sometimes be of help; but rather more often they constitute a hindrance. They stand in the way of objective, lucid perception. Above all, society never constitutes an authority or a vindication. If society itself, or some institution within it, makes such a claim, then that is a usurpation and one to be strenuously resisted. Society has no right to impose its authority either on inquiry or on its outcome. Neither its views nor its idiom is authoritative. Truth stands outside and above, it cannot be under social or political control. Legitimation of ideas by authority, by consensus, or the social creation of truth, is an abomination.

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This vision is atomistic as well as individualistic. It not only makes the solitary individual a foreigner in his own world, separating him from it, requiring him to assert his independence; it also makes the part sovereign over the whole. The whole is made up of its parts and owes its existence and its characteristics to its parts. The bricks of knowledge – and on this view, knowledge must use bricks of a sort – are individual, isolable sensations or perceptions or ideas: granular entities of some sort, which accumulate so as to form large, and perhaps massive structures. These, however, for all their possible grandeur, are ultimately composed of cognitive atoms, and owe everything to them. Whatever truth may be affirmed about the larger totalities depends on the truth concerning the constituent elements.

The stuff of knowledge begins, as it were, in a disaggregated condition: aggregation or totality is achieved or constructed, but is not there at the start. It adds nothing, and the ultimate reality of which it is composed is, in the end, atomic. And even if this were not a true account of the sequence of events in time, of the actual progression to discovery, and if, in the beginning, there were some initially unsegregated totality – even then, the validity or otherwise of claims concerning it could only be established by disaggregating it, and considering the merits of affirmations about its constituents. Men are atoms, but the material they use is also atomic. In the beginning there were the constituent atoms. Their aggregation is indeed but a summation, which adds nothing to that which is being assembled.

Separation, segregation, analysis, and independence are at the heart of this approach. Everything that is separable ought to be separated, at least in thought, if not in reality. Indissoluble, inherent linkages are to be avoided. Alliances and alignments, like those occurring in a free society (of which this vision is both a model and a support and an echo), are contingent and freely chosen: they are not prescribed, obligatory, or rigid. Ideas behave like individualist men: not born into estates or castes, they combine freely and as freely dissolve their associations. Likewise, ideas make free contracts and form free associations among each other, rather than being suborned by status imposed on them from above, by some theory more authoritative than they are themselves.

The main device for achieving innovation and discovery is the recombination of elements: in order to have a keen eye for the possibility of new combinations, one must first of all not be overly wedded to and overawed by their habitual associations. Neither man nor facts nor ideas are allowed to act in restraint of trade, by combining into guilds and improving their own terms through monopoly. The freedom of associ-

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ation applies to ideas as it does to men: no castes or estates are allowed or imposed, for us or for our ideas.

The movement in psychology and in the philosophy of mind known as Associationism might just as well have been called *Dissociationism*: it did indeed make a big fuss of the way in which the association of ideas lay at the base of our construction of our world. But it could do this precisely because it began with an acute sense of the *dissociability* of all elements. It was just because the world had been atomised into the smallest elements that could be found or imagined, that our environment could thereafter be interpreted as the result of the association or aggregation of those elements. The associations actually found were all treated as contingent. They might have been other than in fact they were. The associated clusters had not arrived as clusters but had been assembled by us; they had neither stability nor authority. So they might just as well be rearranged. The patterns we find have no permanent legitimacy, and they are not rooted in the nature of things.

In fact – on this view – there is no such thing as the nature of things. The constellations of things and features we find in our world do not constitute a God-given, hence sacred and normative order; they are an accidental by-product of the interplay of natural forces. We explore the world by seeing actual patterns as contingent variants of deeper factors, and these we explore by rearranging actual patterns, in real or imaginary experiments. Freedom of experiment is analogous to freedom of trade, and each leads to growth in its own sphere, and the forms of freedom and consequent growth aid each other. Each is opposed to the imposition of hallowed rules or rigidities, whether based on tradition or revelation.

It is just this which distinguishes the atomic vision from the more customary way of seeing the world, which accepts habitual linkages as inherent in the nature of things, and has little if any sense of the fragility or contingency of these associations, and does not presume to experiment with them. Cultures freeze associations, and endow them with a feel of necessity. They turn mere worlds into *homes*, where men can feel comfortable, where they belong rather than explore, where things have their allocated places and form a system. That is what a culture is. By contrast, atomistic philosophy loosens and corrodes these linkages. Atomistic individualism is custom-corrosive and culture-corrosive. It facilitates the growth of knowledge, and of productive effectiveness, but it weakens the authority of cultures and makes the world less habitable, more cold and alien.

Deeply contrasted with the atomic theory of knowledge, there is what one might call the organic vision. First of all, this vision repudiates the

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individualism of its rival. No man, least of all when he endeavours to know and understand the world, is an island unto himself. Knowledge is essentially a team game. Anyone who observes, investigates or interprets the world, inevitably deploys concepts which are carried by an entire cultural/linguistic community. He cannot on his own understand the rules of its operation, if indeed he can understand them at all. They work through him, rather than simply being his self-created tools. Their wisdom is greater than his own.

No single individual is capable of excogitating the system of ideas required to make a world: only the unconscious cunning of a culture and a language is capable of such an achievement. Man cannot act on his own, but only when sustained by and interacting with other participants in this collective game. The ideas of a culture, of a historic tradition, of an ongoing community, work through him. He is their agent, and cannot be their author, or even, perhaps, their critic.

Likewise, the objects deployed in the construction of a world are not some homogeneous assembly of similar grains, differing only in – What? Colour, shape, hardness? – as the individualist/atomic tradition would have it. On the contrary, the constituent elements form a system, whose parts are in intimate and intricate relation with each other. Separation of all separables is not the heart of wisdom, but of folly. Any strong striving in this direction is a symptom of poverty of spirit, of lack of true understanding, of narrowness of vision, of a failure of comprehension. The sensitive mind and heart see and feel the totality; they appreciate the connectedness of all its parts and do not seek to break up that unity.

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## 2 The rivals

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The standing of the two philosophic visions is not altogether similar. Their histories, their places in the world, are not fully parallel. The atomistic one was the first to receive deliberate formulation, but not the first to come into existence. Partisans of the organic vision would say that just because it is the primordial and normal form, it needed no articulation. It was at its best when it was free of self-consciousness, when it had no need to reflect on its own existence. Its innocence was its glory, the sign of its primordial and legitimate place in human life. Formulating it and presenting it as a theory may well soil it. Its validity lies beyond argument, arguing its merits only demeans and contradicts it. A real traditionalist does not know that he is one, his tradition simply is his life and his being: once he knows it as *a* tradition, one among others, or even as opposed to reason, he has been corrupted by his knowledge of something else.

The fact that the atomistic view was formulated before ever it was lived may likewise be a sign of its artificial, indeed pathological character. Live first, think after: those who need to think out their identity before living it betray their unfitness to live. Nobility is conveyed by the priority of being over thought, which is but a kind of embellishment, not a refuge or fortification. Aristocrats simply *are*, parvenus *do*, the rootless try to *argue* their identity. Such, at any rate, would be the 'organic' view of the matter.

Descartes was perhaps the chief, certainly the most famous and elegant, progenitor of intellectual individualism, the Samuel Smiles of individualist cognitive entrepreneurialism. He insisted that true knowledge could best be obtained by a single individual, who had bravely and ruthlessly freed himself from the incubus of the conventional wisdom of his own culture and had built up a new capital exclusively from neat, distinct, clear elements, separate from each other. Acting alone, step by separate step, *that* is the basic rule of procedure. Such an inquirer kept good accounts and incurred no cognitive debt. He trades only with his

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own self-made capital and need fear no taint which might devalue his future achievements.

The programme of individually erected and checked, socially disembodied and detached, carefully erected cognitive accumulations, was carried further by the school of so-called British empiricists. It was they who in the end provided a picture of knowledge constructed from homogeneous, granular elements – perceptions, sensations or ideas – standardised bricks in a neat edifice of knowledge. The culmination of this tradition is to be found in the work of David Hume. What really distinguished the school was its acute sense of the independence of the atomic elements which went into the erection of a world-picture. Nothing was inherently linked to anything else, the base-line of knowledge was an assembly of disconnected atoms.

The organic counter-picture was formulated explicitly only in reaction to the atomistic/individual vision. Previously it had needed no formulation, but now it needed vindication against the new solitary men. So, in this sense, but in this sense only, it was *later*. Its adherents, of course, would deny that it was in any real sense ‘later’. Its overt articulation might indeed have come later; but what it describes had long existed, indeed it had been the normal and healthy condition of mankind. It had been *lived* and practised, long before it had been turned into a theory. It feels distaste at its opponents, who have soiled it and deprived it of its innocence and, in some measure, reduced it to their own level, by forcing it to argue, to articulate, to render life subject to abstraction. If forced to do so by the need to reply to its opponents, it does so only with distaste.

Men had been members of organic communities as they had spoken prose, without knowing they were doing so, taking it for granted: without being in possession of a concept or a word for expressing what they lived, and without feeling the lack of it. It was only when an unnatural, scientific vision of knowledge, which detached cognition from all that was social and human, had appeared on the scene, that the organic perception was provoked into consciousness and self-definition. Goaded into defending itself, it remained uneasy about its own articulation: it senses a betrayal, an excessive concession to its opponents. Its protagonists certainly prefer a position of strength, from which a smile of contempt is more appropriate, and indeed more effective, than an argument.

The confrontation of the two visions is not something which occurs only in the intellectual, literary, or academic spheres. It is far more deeply rooted in life and pervades social and political conflicts and options. In some places it does so neatly and conspicuously. It may tie in



with the principal fissures in the society in question. Sometimes, on the other hand, it may cut across them. For instance, romantic organicists are not unknown in Britain: Burke, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, and, later, D. H. Lawrence, Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Oakeshott, Scruton. As for the atomist individualists, there is of course a great lineage leading from Hobbes to Russell.

But this deep philosophical opposition does not, in Britain, define the confrontations of political life: it cuts right across it. In fact, it is represented, in extreme form, in *each* of the major parties. The Tories contain both romantics and formalistic market enthusiasts. The partisans of rustic hierarchy somehow align themselves with irreverent opportunist yuppies: they are at one in their dislike of do-gooding egalitarian paternalism. The Burke–Oakeshott poets of deferential rural idylls cooperate amiably in the Conservative party with the ‘smart-aleck’ operators and insider traders, sometimes of less than prestigious social origins. Labour has both its sentimental William Morris romantics and its technocratic welfare engineers, its Tawneys and its Webbs. The Fabian dream of government by benign statistically informed bureaucrat blends with the vision of the unspecialised craftsman, fulfilled in his work, earthy and authentic, unconnected to modern sanitation, untouched by modern vulgarity. The nostalgia for an unspecialised, profit-spurning, natural economy is aligned with the humourless bureaucracy of welfare.

In other words, although the English are perfectly familiar with the basic contrast and are endowed with a wealth of fine literary expressions of it, it would be quite impossible to give an account of their political life in terms of it. If you can identify a man as a romantic or a rationalist, you cannot infer from this which way he will vote. The main cleavages of actual, effective political life simply cannot be plotted onto the deep intellectual distinction which concerns us. They defy it. In Alan Macfarlane’s version of English romantic populism, the archaic-traditional element he identifies is at the same time presented as highly individualistic, and as having made an important contribution to the emergence of modernity (Macfarlane 1978). If he is right, the English were at their most individualist when they were also most traditional. Other nations had to do violence to their traditional nature so as to become modern: the English only needed to remain true to themselves.

Continental romanticism tends to be populist. The unconscious, earthy wisdom which it often idealises, and contrasts with abstract barren reason, is generally credited to the peasantry. In England such an attitude may perhaps be found in, say, Wordsworth but, all in all, it is badly hampered by the sheer absence of peasants. It is hard, though

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perhaps not impossible, to hold up something that barely exists as a model. There was not much yeomanry left after the Enclosures and the move to the cities. In some cases, notably in Burke and Oakeshott, there is a kind of inverse populism, which it is rather odd to call by such a name at all: unconscious political wisdom is credited to the ruling class. It is an elitism really, an elitism invoking, not the formal training of the rulers, but its alleged redundancy. Their wisdom is located in what they *are*, not what they learnt, and it cannot possibly be taught. The attribution of a superior wisdom beyond the reach of formal instruction, indeed antithetical to it, cannot be credited to the unlettered, as you might expect on the analogy of other forms of anti-intellectualism. It is in the hands of those who, although they have received formal education, know full, in virtue of their superior breeding, that they need not and must not take it seriously. There is also, in men such as Hoggart or Raymond Williams, the attempt to romanticise the culture of an old working class: this is the nostalgia provoked by the disappearance, no longer of the old yeomanry, but of Bethnal Green, its age-mellowed culture swept away by high-rise council flats. (Something similar happened in Czech society under Communism, when populist ethnography turned from the farmers to the urban working class – but this happened under political pressure!) There is also the unusual romanticism of a D. H. Lawrence in the form of the interesting view, never seriously tested, that gamekeepers make better lovers than landowners. So all in all one must say that the attribution of deep, trans-rational, organic wisdom in Britain is so untidily and multifariously related to social strata that it simply cannot be tied in with, and reinforce, any political cleavages in the country. The Wisdom of the Deep is variously credited to a whole range of diverse social strata and interests, and so its political impact is liable to cancel out. Organic intuition against cold ratiocination – this is not often the dominant issue in general elections.

There are less blessed parts of the world where this is not so, where the confrontation of atomists and organicists does capture much of the central emotional charge, the underlying inspiration, of real, concrete political life, where this profound philosophical opposition meshes in with the alliances and hatreds of daily and political life. This was nowhere more so perhaps than in a dynastic empire which ended in 1918, was located in the Danube valley, and controlled extensive areas outside it: the Alpine lands, Bohemia, Galicia, wide stretches of the Balkans, and even (though much of this was lost in the course of the nineteenth century) northern Italy.

Once upon a time, notably in 1848, liberals and nationalists could be allies within this Habsburg Empire, united in their shared opposition to