

On Not Misrepresenting Philosophy

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A SPECTRE is haunting the intelligentsia, the spectre of what they call "linguistic philosophy." Sunday newspaper reviewers and sociologists, theologians and dialectical materialists join in abhorring it. But as is the way with many who see spectres their reports are often incorrect and incoherent. Mr. Ernest Gellner who has joined the ranks of the philosophical ghost-seers in "Logical Positivism and the Spurious Fox" (*U.L.R.*, 3) is no exception. Much of what he says is indeed not worth answering. The mixture of gossip and sociology, insinuation and condescension is likely to make the uninformed reader distrust Gellner just as much as he should. Yet the appearance of any discussion of contemporary British philosophy in a journal of the Left is itself an event of importance. The socialist intellectual tradition is at a moment of crisis when there are opening new possibilities of an approach to human culture that bears neither the frozen mask of Stalinism nor the glib smile of the cultural eclectic. At such a time it is peculiarly important that we should understand the impoverishment which Marxism has suffered as a result of its isolation from the best work in philosophy. (There is an interesting similarity in philosophical style between Marxists and neo-Thomists, which springs from their sharing the same type of self-imposed isolation.)

It would therefore be a misfortune if Gellner's misunderstandings and consequent misrepresentations were to gain currency. What is perhaps most misleading is his use of the label "linguistic philosophy" to cover what are in fact very different philosophical attitudes and doctrines. All that I want to do in this article is to bring out with a single example how Gellner misdescribes the work of Wittgenstein; for he gives the impression at least of expounding doctrines connected with that work. If I have misunderstood his intentions, I may at any rate assist others in avoiding a misunderstanding which his obscure but abusive style of writing is likely to provoke. But at the outset it ought to be emphasized that Wittgenstein's work is complex and that its complexity is important. All that I can therefore hope to do, which is to indicate one theme of Wittgenstein's later thought and its possible importance, must be inadequate. But before I do even this two remarks may perhaps be in place. The first is that Wittgenstein's work stands in a far more complicated relationship to the history of philosophy than Mr. Gellner's article suggested. Plato, St. Augustine, Schopenhauer, William James, Moritz Schlick—these and more provided problems for Wittgenstein. And the truth that does lie in recent talk about a "revolution in philosophy" ought not to blind us to the extent to which Wittgenstein provided new answers to the old questions: "What is knowledge?" "What is perception?" "What is understanding?" and so on. The second is that not only, as Gellner admits, did Wittgenstein not assert that the world is totally non-mysterious but also

that those who have learnt most from Wittgenstein include a number of Christians who are presumably committed by their faith to something quite other than this. Wittgenstein's aphorism that "Philosophy leaves everything as it is" says nothing of how things are.

The theme from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* on which I want to touch is that of the non-private character of language. What I shall try to do is three-fold. I shall seek to show why the conception of a private language is important and where the roots of this conception lie. Next I shall attempt to delineate part of Wittgenstein's attack on this notion. Finally I shall try to present one or two of Wittgenstein's key ideas (including one mentioned by Gellner) in the light of this discussion.

The conception of a private language is rooted both in the history of philosophy and in our own conceptual inclinations. I know what the word "red" means because I have seen red objects. I know what the word "pain" means because I have felt pain. My understanding is totally limited by and totally dependent upon my experience. In short, all the materials of thinking are derived either from our outward or inward sentiment: the mixture and composition of these belongs alone to the mind and will" (Hume). All our concepts are formed by abstraction from experience. This is the doctrine of a great philosophical tradition. That something has gone amiss with this tradition of empiricism very near its starting point is evident from the fact that it follows from its doctrines that language is primarily a private matter and only secondarily and as it were accidentally public. For since all my experience is mine and all your experience is yours, what I mean by "red" and "pain" is determined by one thing and what you mean by them is determined by another. My words take their meaning from my experience, yours from yours. How then is language public at all? Because we can point. It is not surprising that ostensive definition has a central role in much empiricist discussion. Our words have a common meaning because we can point at the objects to which they refer and which they describe. And for such a doctrine there will be necessary contrast between the outer world of material objects to which we can point and the inner world of thought and sensation to which we cannot point. The problem of how we can understand talk about the minds of others is necessarily crucial for empiricism.

That we can have a private language, at least, that there is something essentially private about language, at most, these are assertions to which adherence to this sort of tradition would commit us. So the assertion that there cannot be a private language, that language cannot be both language[^] and private, puts this whole tradition in question. But what are the arguments which will back up this assertion? Wittgenstein has several of which I want

to mention only one. Suppose someone has a private language. Every time that he feels a certain sensation he writes down or says "E." "E" is the name of his sensation. But now is "E" a private word? Can he himself understand "E" without translating it into words which belong to our common public language? As Wittgenstein puts this: "What reason have we for calling 'E' the sign for a *sensation*"? For '*sensation*' is a word of our common language, not of one intelligible to me alone. So the use of this word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands.—And it would not help either to say that it need not be a *sensation*; that when he writes 'E,' he has *something*—and that is all that can be said. 'Has' and 'something' also belong to our common language." (*Philosophical Investigations*, 261.) That is to distinguish the shape "E" when he writes it or the thought when he utters it to himself he has to think of it as the *name* of a *sensation* (and not as just a capital "E" or an abbreviation for "Eric") and he cannot do this without such a word as "*sensation*" which is learnt not simply by having sensations. Someone who tried to have a purely private language would in the end find himself merely uttering indiscriminable sounds (for to discriminate them he would have to fall back on public language) and these would not be language.

How do we learn to use words like "*sensation*," "*pain*" and so on? Not simply by having experiences, but by being introduced to ways of expressing what we feel in the context of what Wittgenstein calls "language-games," that is a whole way of acting and behaving in which the language used has to be understood as part of the whole activity. A child cries and is asked "Where does it hurt?" The iodine is applied; the child is asked: "Is the pain less now? Is the stinging over?" It is through this type of situation not only that the child does learn the meaning of words like "*pain*," but that the child must learn them. The word in isolation attached to the sensation of pain in isolation: what would this be? We can only begin to understand the suggestion that the word might function thus because we ourselves do not understand the words "*pain*" and "*sensation*" in this way.

To make the same point differently. Mr. P. F. Strawson has objected to Wittgenstein's thesis as follows: "Wittgenstein gives himself considerable trouble over the question of how a man would *introduce* a name for a sensation into this private language. But we need imagine no special ceremony. He might simply be struck by the recurrence of a certain sensation and get into the habit of making a certain mark in a different place every time it occurred. The making of the marks would help to impress the occurrence on his memory." (*Mind*, 1954, p. 85.) What Strawson says might happen is of course almost exactly what Hobbes says does happen. Strawson's empiricist view of language may help to remind us how contemporary philosophy

is far less homogeneous than Gellner suggested. What is wrong with this view can be seen most easily if we begin by considering not a word like "pain" or "sensation" but a word like "cow." Suppose a man were to utter a certain sound every time that a cow appeared. Dr. Norman Malcolm, commenting on Strawson's argument (*Philosophical Review*, 1954, p. 553) has pointed out that "we need to ask, what makes the latter sound a *word*, and what makes it the word for *cow*? Is there no difficulty here? Is it sufficient that the sound is uttered when and only when a cow is present? Of course not. The sound might refer to anything or nothing." That is, it need not be a word any more than, if I suffered from a nervous tick of the head every time that I saw a cow, my movement of my head would be a word. Malcolm then says of the sound in question, "What is necessary is that it should play a part in various activities, in calling, fetching, counting cows, distinguishing cows from other things and pictures of cows from pictures of other things. If the word has no fixed place in activities ('language-games') of this sort, then it isn't a word for *cow*. To be sure, I can sit in my chair and talk about cows and not be engaged in any of those activities—but what makes my words *refer* to cows is the fact that I have already mastered those activities; they lie in the background." So too with a mark which a man made every time he felt a sensation. What would be needed to make that mark a word and a word specifically referring to the sensation would be a use for the word in expressing the sensation or calling attention to it or asking for its cause to be removed. In such a context of public uses the word would be more than simply a mark recalling the sensation; and it would have to be more than this even to be such a mark.

This very compressed summary of one point, even though a central point, in Wittgenstein's philosophy is enough to dispose of some of Gellner's most misleading remarks. "What it amounts to," says Gellner of what he calls the key image of linguistic philosophy, "is *naturalism with regard to language*, seeing language as a natural process and activity and solving philosophical problems in the course of an investigation of this process." But nothing in this or so far as I know any other of

Wittgenstein's arguments depends on such a naturalism. What Wittgenstein investigates are not the usages and idioms which people happen to employ, but the uses to which language is and can be put and especially the kind of use to which particular classes of expressions have to be put if they are to have sense. The way in which the notion of use appears in Wittgenstein's thought is clear from the above example. Neither "cow" nor "sensation" would be the words they are unless we knew how to relate them to the variety of uses to which they can be put. Language does not just happen: we do things with it, put it to certain uses. The notion of the uses of language is close to the notion of a language-game.

Moreover, for Wittgenstein this kind of investigation of language only has importance relative to its purpose of resolving philosophical perplexity. And although Wittgenstein had an important view of what philosophy was his central contributions to philosophy consist in actual pieces of philosophizing of which his remarks about philosophy are only one part. The impressiveness of his philosophy lies not, as Gellner seems to indicate, in any general thesis about how philosophical problems are to be solved, but in his own work on the problems. Indeed, his remarks about philosophy seem to me incomprehensible apart from that work.

I could of course have approached Wittgenstein's thought from a number of other points. All that I have indicated is one theme. I chose this theme for the following reason. Marx's actual philosophy was in part a dismissal of empiricism; but the philosophical tools available to Marx were such that his own positive philosophical statements are always liable to conceptual muddle. And Lenin falls back into the empiricist confusions about experience even in a work which purports to attack empiricism. But in his historical analyses of that culture of which empiricist philosophy was a part Marx helped to expose the myth of man as a private, isolated individual. Empiricist philosophy was a not distinguished component of individualist culture, and a not unimportant background to that myth. So its exposure ought to matter to those who think Marx's insights on this point are of some importance. In a way the thesis that a private language is

possible lies very near the heart of the dualism that has infected philosophy ever since the last scholastics and Descartes. What Wittgenstein has achieved in showing how our concepts of, for example, sensation are inseparably connected with our activities and behaviour is a possibility of overcoming that dualism. The connectedness of the inner life and the outer has been re-established. The importance of this cannot be underestimated. One has only to remember how psychology has been hampered by the apparent need to choose between the two unsatisfactory alternatives of introspectionism and behaviourism. Or one may recall Lukacs's strictures on the way in which the introspectionism of Joyce and the behaviourism of Zola equally fail to portray human beings as human beings.

I hope that no one will suppose that I have in this last paragraph *established* a connection between Wittgenstein's work and such large issues. All I have done is to indicate one small point where the importance of what Wittgenstein did can begin to be grasped. There is, however, another and a more elementary issue raised by Gellner's article. Of all the ideas that minister to the sickness of our age none is more influential in the university than the conception that there are only two alternatives—the kind of objectivity that dwells in the ivory tower or the kind of partisanship that does not care about truth. The triviality of the academic who wants his work to raise no large issues and the falsification of the Stalinist who wants everything subserved to one immediate issue reinforce each other. Those propagandists against contemporary academic philosophy, from Joad to Gellner, who promote the view that it is an essentially trivial pursuit unwittingly strengthen the hands of those who seek to present us with this alternative.

One last point: of course, there is plenty of bad philosophy about today. If this was all Gellner wanted to say, no one would have disagreed. And the bad philosophy of an age is always a parody of the good. But any attempt to present Wittgenstein's work and influence in the way that Gellner does is bound to fail. To present Kant as essentially holding two propositions, or Mane, would be to make oneself ridiculous. So it is too with Wittgenstein.