



## Philosophical Review

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Ordinary Language

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## ORDINARY LANGUAGE

PHILOSOPHERS' arguments have frequently turned on references to what we do and do not say or, more strongly, on what we can and cannot say. Such arguments are present in the writings of Plato and are common in those of Aristotle.

In recent years, some philosophers, having become feverishly exercised about the nature and methodology of their calling, have made much of arguments of this kind. Other philosophers have repudiated them. Their disputes on the merits of these arguments have not been edifying, since both sides have been apt to garble the question. I want to ungarble it.

### “ORDINARY”

There is one phrase which recurs in this dispute, the phrase ‘the use of ordinary language’. It is often, quite erroneously, taken to be paraphrased by ‘ordinary linguistic usage’. Some of the partisans assert that all philosophical questions are questions about the use of ordinary language, or that all philosophical questions are solved or are about to be solved by considering ordinary linguistic usage.

Postponing the examination of the notion of *linguistic usage*, I want to begin by contrasting the phrase ‘the use of ordinary language’ with the similar-seeming but totally different phrase ‘the ordinary use of the expression “. . . ”’. When people speak of the use of ordinary language, the word ‘ordinary’ is in implicit or explicit contrast with ‘out-of-the-way’, ‘esoteric’, ‘technical’, ‘poetical’, ‘notational’ or, sometimes, ‘archaic’. ‘Ordinary’ means ‘common’, ‘current’, ‘colloquial’, ‘vernacular’, ‘natural’, ‘prosaic’, ‘non-notational’, ‘on the tongue of Everyman’, and is usually in contrast with dictions which only a few people know how to use, such as the technical terms or artificial symbolisms of lawyers, theologians, economists, philosophers, cartographers, mathematicians, symbolic logicians and players of Royal Tennis. There is no sharp boundary between ‘common’ and ‘uncommon’, ‘technical’ and ‘untechnical’ or ‘old-fashioned’ and ‘current’. Is ‘carburettor’ a word in common use or only in rather uncommon use? Is ‘purl’ on the lips of Every-

man, or on the lips only of Everywoman? What of 'manslaughter', 'inflation', 'quotient' and 'off-side'? On the other hand, no one would hesitate on which side of this no-man's-land to locate 'isotope' or 'bread', 'material implication' or 'if', 'transfinite cardinal' or 'eleven', 'ween' or 'suppose'. The edges of 'ordinary' are blurred, but usually we are in no doubt whether a diction does or does not belong to ordinary parlance.

But in the other phrase, 'the ordinary use of the expression "..."', 'ordinary' is not in contrast with 'esoteric', 'archaic' or 'specialist', etc. It is in contrast with 'non-stock' or 'non-standard'. We can contrast the stock or standard use of a fish-knife or sphygmomanometer with some non-regulation use of it. The stock use of a fish-knife is to cut up fish with; but it might be used for cutting seed-potatoes or as a heliograph. A sphygmomanometer might, for all I know, be used for checking tyre pressures; but this is not its standard use. Whether an implement or instrument is a common or a specialist one, there remains the distinction between its stock use and non-stock uses of it. If a term is a highly technical term, or a non-technical term, there remains the distinction between its stock use and non-stock uses of it. If a term is a highly technical term, most people will not know its stock use or, *a fortiori*, any non-stock uses of it either, if it has any. If it is a vernacular term, then nearly everyone will know its stock use, and most people will also know some non-stock uses of it, if it has any. There are lots of words, like 'of', 'have' and 'object', which have no one stock use, any more than string, paper, brass and pocket-knives have just one stock use. Lots of words have not got any non-stock uses. 'Sixteen' has, I think, none; nor has 'daffodil'. Nor, maybe, have collar-studs. Non-stock uses of a word are, e.g., metaphorical, hyperbolic, poetical, stretched and deliberately restricted uses of it. Besides contrasting the stock use with certain non-stock uses, we often want to contrast the stock use of an expression with certain alleged, suggested, or recommended uses of it. This is a contrast not between the regular use and irregular uses, but between the regular use and what the regular use is alleged to be or what it is recommended that it should be.

When we speak of the ordinary or stock use of a word we need not be characterising it in any further way, e.g., applauding or

recommending it or giving it any testimonial. We need not be appealing to or basing anything on its stock-ness. The words 'ordinary', 'standard' and 'stock' can serve merely to refer to a use, without describing it. They are philosophically colourless and can be easily dispensed with. When we speak of the regular night-watchman, we are merely indicating the night-watchman whom we know independently to be the one usually on the job; we are not yet giving any information about him or paying any tribute to his regularity. When we speak of the standard spelling of a word or the standard gauge of British railway tracks, we are not describing or recommending or countenancing this spelling or this gauge; we are giving a reference to it which we expect our hearers to get without hesitation. Sometimes, naturally, this indication does not work. Sometimes the stock use in one place is different from its stock use in another, as with 'suspenders'. Sometimes, its stock use at one period differs from its stock use at another, as with 'nice'. A dispute about which of two or five uses in the stock use is not a philosophical dispute about any one of those uses. It is therefore philosophically uninteresting, though settlement of it is sometimes requisite for communication between philosophers.

If I want to talk about a non-stock use of a word or fish-knife, it is not enough to try to refer to it by the phrase 'the non-stock use of it', for there may be any number of such non-stock uses. To call my hearer's attention to a particular non-stock use of it, I have to give some description of it, for example, to cite a special context in which the word is known to be used in a non-stock way.

This, though always possible, is not often necessary for the stock use of an expression, although in philosophical debates one is sometimes required to do it, since one's fellow-philosophers are at such pains to pretend that they cannot think what its stock use is—a difficulty which, of course, they forget all about when they are teaching children or foreigners how to use it, and when they are consulting dictionaries.

It is easy now to see that learning or teaching the ordinary or stock use of an expression need not be, though it may be, learning or teaching the use of an ordinary or vernacular expression, just as learning or teaching the standard use of an instrument need not be, though it can be, learning or teaching the use of a household uten-

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sil. Most words and instruments, whether out-of-the-way or common, have their stock uses and may or may not also have non-stock uses as well.

A philosopher who maintained that certain philosophical questions are questions about the ordinary or stock uses of certain expressions would not therefore be committing himself to the view that they are questions about the uses of ordinary or colloquial expressions. He could admit that the noun 'infinitesimals' is not on the lips of Everyman and still maintain that Berkeley was examining the ordinary or stock use of 'infinitesimals', namely the standard way, if not the only way, in which this word was employed by mathematical specialists. Berkeley was not examining the use of a colloquial word; he was examining the regular or standard use of a relatively esoteric word. We are not contradicting ourselves if we say that he was examining the ordinary use of an unordinary expression.

Clearly a lot of philosophical discussions are of this type. In the philosophy of law, biology, physics, mathematics, formal logic, theology, psychology and grammar, technical concepts have to be examined, and these concepts are what are expressed by more or less *recherché* dictions. Doubtless this examination embodies attempts to elucidate in untechnical terms the technical terms of this or that specialist theory, but this very attempt involves discussing the ordinary or stock uses of these technical terms.

Doubtless, too, study by philosophers of the stock uses of expressions which we all employ has a certain primacy over their study of the stock uses of expressions which only, e.g., scientific or legal specialists employ. These specialists explain to novices the stock uses of their terms of art partly by talking to them in non-esoteric terms; they do not also have to explain to them the stock uses of these non-esoteric terms. Untechnical terminology is, in this way, basic to technical terminologies. Hard cash has this sort of primacy over cheques and bills of exchange—as well as the same inconveniences when large and complex transactions are afoot.

Doubtless, finally, some of the cardinal problems of philosophy are set by the existence of logical tangles not in this as opposed to that branch of specialist theory, but in the thought and the discourse of everyone, specialists and non-specialists alike. The con-

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cepts of *cause, evidence, knowledge, mistake, ought, can*, etc., are not the perquisites of any particular groups of people. We employ them before we begin to develop or follow specialist theories; and we could not follow or develop such theories unless we could already employ these concepts. They belong to the rudiments of all thinking, including specialist thinking. But it does not follow from this that all philosophical questions are questions about such rudimentary concepts. The architect must indeed be careful about the materials of his building; but it is not only about these that he must be careful.

### “USE”

But now for a further point. The phrase ‘the ordinary (i.e., stock) use of the expression “. . . .”’ is often so spoken that the stress is made to fall on the word ‘expression’ or else on the word ‘ordinary’ and the word ‘use’ is slurred over. The reverse ought to be the case. The operative word is ‘*use*’.

Hume’s question was not about the word ‘cause’; it was about the *use* of ‘cause’. It was just as much about the *use* of ‘Ursache’. For the use of ‘cause’ is the same as the use of ‘Ursache’, though ‘cause’ is not the same word as ‘Ursache’. Hume’s question was not a question about a bit of the English language in any way in which it was not a question about a bit of the German language. The job done with the English word ‘cause’ is not an English job, or a continental job. What I do with my Nottingham-made boots—namely walk in them—is not Nottingham-made; but nor is it Leicester-made or Derby-made. The transactions I perform with a sixpenny-bit have neither milled nor unmilled edges; they have no edges at all. We might discuss what I can and cannot do with a sixpenny-bit, namely what I can and cannot buy with it, what change I should and should not give or take for it, and so on; but such a discussion would not be a discussion about the date, ingredients, shape, colour or provenance of the coin. It is a discussion about the purchasing power of this coin, or of any other coin of the same value, and not about *this coin*. It is not a numismatic discussion, but a commercial or financial discussion. Putting the stress on the word ‘use’ helps to bring out the important fact that the enquiry is an enquiry not into the other features or properties of

the word or coin or pair of boots, but only into what is done with it, or with anything else with which we do the same thing. That is why it is so misleading to classify philosophical questions as linguistic questions—or as non-linguistic questions.

It is, I think, only in fairly recent years that philosophers have picked up the trick of talking about the use of expressions, and even made a virtue of so talking. Our forefathers, at one time, talked instead of the *concepts* or *ideas* corresponding to expressions. This was in many ways a very convenient idiom, and one which in most situations we do well to retain. It had the drawback, though, that it encouraged people to start Platonic or Lockean hares about the status and provenance of these concepts or ideas. The impression was given that a philosopher who wanted to discuss, say, the concept of *cause* or *infinitesimal* or *remorse* was under some obligation to start by deciding whether concepts have a supra-mundane, or only a psychological existence; whether they are transcendent intuitables or only private introspectibles.

Later on, when philosophers were in revolt against psychologism in logic, there was a vogue for another idiom, the idiom of talking about the *meanings* of expressions, and the phrase 'the concept of cause' was replaced by the phrase "the meaning of the word 'cause' or of any other with the same meaning". This new idiom was also subject to anti-Platonic and anti-Lockean cavils; but its biggest drawback was a different one. Philosophers and logicians were at that time the victims of a special and erroneous theory about meaning. They construed the verb 'to mean' as standing for a relation between an expression and some other entity. The meaning of an expression was taken to be an entity which had that expression for its name. So studying the meaning of the phrase 'the solar system' was supposed or half-supposed to be the same thing as studying the solar system. It was partly in reaction against this erroneous view that philosophers came to prefer the idiom "the use of the expressions ' . . . caused . . . ' and ' . . . the solar system ' ". We are accustomed to talking of the use of safety-pins, bannisters, table-knives, badges and gestures; and this familiar idiom neither connotes nor seems to connote any queer relations to any queer entities. It draws our attention to the teachable procedures and techniques of handling or employing things, without suggesting unwanted correlates.

Learning how to manage a canoe-paddle, a traveller's cheque or a postage-stamp, is not being introduced to an extra entity. Nor is learning how to manage the words 'if', 'ought' and 'limit'.

There is another merit in this idiom. Where we can speak of managing, handling and employing we can speak of mismanaging, mishandling and misemploying. There are rules to keep or break, codes to observe or flout. Learning to use expressions, like learning to use coins, stamps, cheques and hockey-sticks, involves learning to do certain things with them and not others; when to do certain things with them, and when not to do them. Among the things that we learn in the process of learning to use linguistic expressions are what we may vaguely call 'rules of logic'; for example, that though Mother and Father can both be tall, they cannot both be taller than one another; or that though uncles can be rich or poor, fat or thin, they cannot be male or female, but only male. Where it would sound unplausible to say that concepts or ideas or meanings might be meaningless or absurd, there is no such unplausibility in asserting that someone might use a certain expression absurdly. An attempted or suggested way of operating with an expression may be logically illegitimate or impossible, but a universal or a state of consciousness or a meaning cannot be logically legitimate or illegitimate.

#### "USE" AND "UTILITY"

On the other hand there are inconveniences in talking much of the *uses* of expressions. People are liable to construe 'use' in one of the ways which English certainly does permit, namely as a synonym of 'utility' or 'usefulness'. They then suppose that to discuss the use of an expression is to discuss what it is useful for or how useful it is. Sometimes such considerations are philosophically profitable. But it is easy to see that discussing the use (*versus* uselessness) of something is quite different from discussing the use (*versus* misuse) of it, i.e., the way, method or manner of using it. The female driver may learn what is the utility of a sparking-plug, but learning this is not learning how to operate with a sparking-plug. She does not have or lack skills or competences with sparking-plugs, as she does with steering-wheels, coins, words and knives. Her sparking-plugs manage themselves; or, rather, they are not man-



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aged at all. They just function automatically, until they cease to function. They are useful, even indispensable to her. But she does not manage or mismanage them.

Conversely, a person who has learned how to whistle tunes may not find the whistling of tunes at all useful or even pleasant to others or to himself. He manages, or sometimes mismanages his lips, tongue and breath; and, more indirectly, manages or mismanages the notes he produces. He has got the trick of it; he can show us and perhaps even tell us how the trick is performed. But it is a useless trick. The question, How do you use your breath or your lips in whistling? has a positive and complicated answer. The question, What is the use, or utility of whistling? has a negative and simple one. The former is a request for the details of a technique; the latter is not. Questions about the use of an expression are often, though not always, questions about the way to operate with it; not questions about what the employer of it needs it for. They are How-questions, not What-for-questions. This latter sort of question can be asked, but it is seldom necessary to ask it, since the answer is usually obvious. In a foreign country, I do not ask what a centime or a peseta is for; what I do ask is how many of them I have to give for a certain article, or how many of them I am to expect to get in exchange for a half-crown. I want to know what its purchasing power is; not that it is for making purchases with.

### “USE” AND “USAGE”

Much more insidious than this confusion between the way of operating with something and its usefulness, is the confusion between a ‘use’, i.e., a way of operating with something, and a ‘usage’. Lots of philosophers, whose dominant good resolution is to discern logico-linguistic differences, talk without qualms as if ‘use’ and ‘usage’ were synonyms. This is just a howler; for which there is little excuse except that in the archaic phrase ‘use and wont’, ‘use’ could, perhaps, be replaced by ‘usage’; that ‘used to’ does mean ‘accustomed to’; and that to be hardly used is to suffer hard usage.

A usage is a custom, practice, fashion or vogue. It can be local or widespread, obsolete or current, rural or urban, vulgar or academic. There cannot be a misuseage any more than there can be a

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miscustom or a misvogue. The methods of discovering linguistic usages are the methods of philologists.

By contrast, a way of operating with a razor blade, a word, a traveller's cheque or a canoe-paddle is a technique, knack or method. Learning it is learning how to do the thing; it is not finding out sociological generalities, not even sociological generalities about other people who do similar or different things with razor blades, words, travellers' cheques or canoe-paddles. Robinson Crusoe might find out for himself how to make and how to throw boomerangs; but this discovery would tell him nothing about those Australian aborigines who do in fact make and use them in the same way. The description of a conjuring-trick is not the description of all the conjurers who perform or have performed that trick. On the contrary, in order to describe the possessors of the trick, we should have already to be able to give some sort of description of the trick itself. Mrs. Beeton tells us how to make omelets; but she gives us no information about Parisian chefs. Baedeker might tell us about Parisian chefs, and tell us which of them make omelets; but if he wanted to tell us how they make omelets, he would have to describe their techniques in the way that Mrs. Beeton describes the technique of making omelets. Descriptions of usages presuppose descriptions of uses, i.e., ways or techniques of doing the thing, the more or less widely prevailing practice of doing which constitutes the usage.

There is an important difference between the employment of boomerangs, bows and arrows, and canoe-paddles on the one hand and the employment of tennis rackets, tug-of-war ropes, coins, stamps and words on the other hand. The latter are instruments of inter-personal, i.e., concerted or competitive actions. Robinson Crusoe might play some games of patience; but he could not play tennis or cricket. So a person who learns to use a tennis racket, a stroke-side oar, a coin or a word is inevitably in a position to notice other people using these things. He cannot master the tricks of such inter-personal transactions without at the same time finding out facts about some other people's employment and misemployment of them; and normally he will learn a good many of the tricks from noticing other people employing them. Even so, learning the knacks is not and does not require making a sociological study. A child

may learn in the home and the village shop how to use pennies, shillings and pound notes; and his mastery of these slightly complex knacks is not improved by hearing how many people in other places and years have managed and now manage or mismanage their pennies, shillings and pound notes. Perfectly mastering a use is not getting to know everything, or even much, about a usage, even when mastering that use does causally involve finding out a bit about a few other people's practices. We were taught in the nursery how to handle a lot of words; but we were not being taught any historical or sociological generalities about employers of these words. That came later, if it came at all.

Before passing on we should notice one big difference between using canoe-paddles or tennis rackets on the one hand and using postage stamps, safety-pins, coins and words on the other. Tennis rackets are wielded with greater or less skill; even the tennis-champion studies to improve. But, with some unimportant reservations, it is true to say that coins, cheques, stamps, separate words, buttons and shoelaces offer no scope for talent. Either a person knows or he does not know how to use and how not to misuse them. Of course literary composition and argumentation can be more or less skilful; but the essayist or lawyer does not know the meaning of 'rabbit' or 'and' better than Everyman. There is no room here for 'better'. Similarly, the champion chess-player manoeuvres more skilfully than the amateur; but he does not know the permitted moves of the pieces better. They both know them perfectly, or rather they just know them.

Certainly, the cultured chess-player may describe the permitted moves better than does the uncultured chess-player. But he does not make these moves any better. I give change for a half-crown no better than you do. We both just give the correct change. Yet I may describe such transactions more effectively than you can describe them. Knowing how to operate is not knowing how to tell how to operate. This point becomes important when we are discussing, say, the stock way (supposing there is one) of employing the word 'cause'. The doctor knows how to make this use of it as well as anyone, but he may not be able to answer any of the philosopher's enquiries about this way of using it.

In order to avoid these two big confusions, the confusion of 'use'

with 'usefulness' and the confusion of 'use' with 'usage', I try nowadays to use, *inter alia*, 'employ' and 'employment' instead of the verb and noun 'use'. So I say this. Philosophers often have to try to describe the stock (or, more rarely, some non-stock) manner or way of employing an expression. Sometimes such an expression belongs to the vernacular; sometimes to some technical vocabulary; sometimes it is betwixt and between. Describing the mode of employment of an expression does not require and is not usually helped by information about the prevalence or unprevalence of this way of employing it. For the philosopher, like other folk, has long since learned how to employ or handle it, and what he is trying to describe is what he himself has learned.

Techniques are not vogues—but they may have vogues. Some of them must have vogues or be current in some other way. For it is no accident that ways of employing words, as of employing coins, stamps and chessmen, *tend* to be identical through a whole community and over a long stretch of time. We want to understand and be understood; and we learn our native tongue from our elders. Even without the pressure of legislation and dictionaries, our vocabularies tend towards uniformity. Fads and idiosyncrasies in these matters impair communication. Fads and idiosyncrasies in matters of postage stamps, coins and the moves of chessmen are ruled out by explicit legislation, and partly analogous conformities are imposed upon many technical vocabularies by such things as drill-manuals and text-books. Notoriously these tendencies towards uniformity have their exceptions. However, as there naturally do exist many pretty widespread and pretty long enduring vocabulary usages, it is sometimes condonable for a philosopher to remind his readers of a mode of employing an expression by alluding to 'what everyone says' or 'what no one says'. The reader considers the mode of employment that he has long since learned and feels strengthened, when told that big battalions are on his side. In fact, of course, this appeal to prevalence is philosophically pointless, besides being philologically risky. What is wanted is, perhaps, the extraction of the logical rules implicitly governing a concept, i.e., a way of operating with an expression (or any other expression that does the same work). It is probable that the use of this expression, to perform this job, is widely current; but whether it is so or not.

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is of no philosophical interest. Job-analysis is not Mass Observation. Nor is it helped by Mass Observation. But Mass Observation sometimes needs the aid of job-analysis.

Before terminating this discussion of the use of the expression 'the use of the expression "..."', I want to draw attention to an interesting point. We can ask whether a person knows how to use and how not misuse a certain word. But we cannot ask whether he knows how to use a certain *sentence*. When a block of words has congealed into a phrase we can ask whether he knows how to use the phrase. But when a sequence of words has not yet congealed into a phrase, while we can ask whether he knows how to use its ingredient words, we cannot easily ask whether he knows how to use that sequence. Why can we not even ask whether he knows how to use a certain sentence? For we talk about the meanings of sentences, seemingly just as we talk of the meanings of the words in it; so, if knowing the meaning of a word is knowing how to use it, we might have expected that knowing the meaning of a sentence was knowing how to use the sentence. Yet this glaringly does not go.

A cook uses salt, sugar, flour, beans and bacon in making a pie. She uses, and perhaps misuses, the ingredients. But she does not, in this way, use the pie. Her pie is not an ingredient. In a somewhat different way, the cook uses, and perhaps misuses, a rolling-pin, a fork, a frying-pan and an oven. These are the utensils with which she makes her pie. But the pie is not another utensil. The pie is (well or badly) composed out of the ingredients, by means of the utensils. It is what she used them for; but it cannot be listed in either class of them. Somewhat, but only somewhat, similarly a sentence is (well or badly) constructed out of words. It is what the speaker or writer uses them for. He composes it out of them. His sentence is not itself something which, in this way, he either uses or misuses, either uses or does not use. His composition is not a component of his composition. We can tell a person to say something (e.g., ask a question, give a command or narrate an anecdote), using a specified word or phrase; and he will know what he is being told to do. But if we just tell him to pronounce or write down, by itself, that specified word or phrase, he will see the differ-

ence between this order and the other one. For he is not now being told to use, i.e., *incorporate* the word or phrase, but only to pronounce it or write it down. Sentences are things that we say. Words and phrases are what we say things *with*.

There can be dictionaries of words and dictionaries of phrases. But there cannot be dictionaries of sentences. This is not because such dictionaries would have to be infinitely and therefore impracticably long. On the contrary, it is because they could not even begin. Words and phrases are there, in the bin, for people to avail themselves of when they want to say things. But the sayings of these things are not some more things which are there in the bin for people to avail themselves of, when they want to say these things. This fact that words and phrases can, while sentences cannot be misused, since sentences cannot be, in this way, used at all, is quite consistent with the important fact that sentences can be well or ill constructed. We can say things awkwardly or ungrammatically and we can say things which are grammatically proper, but do not make sense.

It follows that there are some radical differences between what is meant by 'the meaning of a word or phrase' and what is meant by 'the meaning of a sentence'. Understanding a word or phrase is knowing how to use it, i.e., make it perform its rôle in a wide range of sentences. But understanding a sentence is not knowing how to make it perform its rôle. The play has not got a rôle.

We are tempted to suppose that the question, How are word-meanings related to sentence-meanings? is a tricky but genuine question, a question, perhaps, rather like, How is the purchasing power of my shilling related to the purchasing power of the contents of my pay-envelope? But this model puts things awry from the start.

If I know the meaning of a word or phrase I know something like a body of unwritten rules, or something like an unwritten code or general recipe. I have learned to use the word correctly in an unlimited variety of different settings. What I know is, in this respect, somewhat like what I know when I know how to use a knight or a pawn at chess. I have learned to put it to its work anywhen and anywhere, if there is work for it to do. But the idea of putting a sentence to its work anywhen and anywhere is fantastic.

It has not got a rôle which it can perform again and again in different plays. It has not got a rôle at all, any more than a play has a rôle. Knowing what it means is not knowing anything like a code or a body of rules, though it requires knowing the codes or rules governing the use of the words or phrases that make it up. There are general rules and recipes for constructing sentences of certain kinds; but not general rules or recipes for constructing the particular sentence 'Today is Monday'. Knowing the meaning of 'Today is Monday' is not knowing general rules, codes or recipes governing the use of this sentence, since there is no such thing as the utilisation or, therefore, the re-utilisation of this sentence. I expect that this ties up with the fact that sentences and clauses make sense or make no sense, where words neither do nor do not make sense, but only have meanings; and that pretence-sentences can be absurd or nonsensical, where pretence-words are neither absurd nor nonsensical, but only meaningless. I can say stupid things, but words can be neither stupid nor not stupid.

#### PHILOSOPHY AND ORDINARY LANGUAGE

The vogue of the phrase 'the use of ordinary language' seems to suggest to some people the idea that there exists a philosophical doctrine according to which (a) all philosophical enquiries are concerned with vernacular, as opposed to more or less technical, academic or esoteric terms; and (b) in consequence, all philosophical discussions ought themselves to be couched entirely in vernacular dictions. The inference is fallacious, though its conclusion has some truth in it. Even if it were true, which it is not, that all philosophical problems are concerned with non-technical concepts, i.e., with the mode of employment of vernacular expressions, it would not follow from this (false) premiss that the discussions of these problems must or had better be in jurymen's English, French or German.

From the fact that a philologist studies those English words which stem from Celtic roots, it does not follow that he must or had better say what he has to say about them in words of Celtic origin. From the fact that a psychologist is discussing the psychology of witticisms, it does not follow that he ought to write wittily all or any of the time. Clearly he ought not to write wittily most of the time.

## ORDINARY LANGUAGE

Most philosophers have in fact employed a good number of the technical terms of past or contemporary logical theory. We may sometimes wish that they had taken a few more pinches of salt, but we do not reproach them for availing themselves of these technical expedients; we should have deplored their long-windedness if they had tried to do without them.

But enslavement to jargon, whether inherited or invented, is, certainly, a bad quality in any writer, whether he be a philosopher or not. It curtails the number of people who can understand and criticise his writings; so it tends to make his own thinking run in a private groove. The use of avoidable jargons is bad literary manners and bad pedagogic policy, as well as being detrimental to the thinker's own wits.

But this is not peculiar to philosophy. Bureaucrats, judges, theologians, literary critics, bankers and, perhaps above all, psychologists and sociologists would all be well advised to try very hard to write in plain and blunt words. None the less, Hobbes who had this virtue of writing plainly and bluntly was a lesser philosopher than Kant who lacked it; and Plato's later dialogues, though harder to translate, have powers which his early dialogues are without. Nor is the simplicity of his diction in Mill's account of mathematics enough to make us prefer it to the account given by Frege, whose diction is more esoteric.

In short, there is no *a priori* or peculiar obligation laid upon philosophers to refrain from talking esoterically; but there is a general obligation upon all thinkers and writers to try to think and write both as powerfully and as plainly as possible. But plainness of diction and power of thought can vary independently, though it is not common for them to do so.

Incidentally it would be silly to require the language of professional journals to be as exoteric as the language of books. Colleagues can be expected to use and understand one another's terms of art. But books are not written only for colleagues. The judge should not address the jury in the language in which he may address his brother judges. Sometimes, but only sometimes, he may be well advised to address even his brother judges, and himself, in the language in which he should address the jury. It all depends on whether his technical terms are proving to be a help or a hindrance.



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They are likely to be a hindrance when they are legacies from a period in which today's questions were not even envisaged. This is what justifies the regular and salutary rebellions of philosophers against the philosophical jargons of their fathers.

There is another reason why philosophers ought sometimes to eschew other people's technical terms. Even when a philosopher is interesting himself in some of the cardinal concepts of, say, physical theory, he is usually partly concerned to state the logical cross-bearings between the concepts of this theory and the concepts of mathematical, theological, biological or psychological theory. Very often his radical puzzle is that of determining these cross-bearings. When trying to solve puzzles of this sort, he cannot naïvely employ the dictions of either theory. He has to stand back from both theories, and discuss the concepts of both in terms which are proprietary to neither. He may coin neutral dictions of his own, but for ease of understanding he may prefer the dictions of Everyman. These have this required neutrality, even if they lack that semi-codification which disciplines the terms of art of professionalised thought. Barter-terms are not as well regimented as the terms of the counting-house; but when we have to determine rates of exchange between different currencies, it is to barter-terms that we may have to turn. Inter-theory negotiations can be and may have to be conducted in pre-theory dictions.

So far I have, I hope, been mollifying rather than provoking. I now want to say two philosophically contentious things.

(a) There is a special reason why philosophers, unlike other professionals and specialists, are constantly jettisoning *in toto* all the technical terms of their own predecessors (save some of the technical terms of formal logic); i.e., why the jargon words of epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, etc., seem to be half-hardy annuals rather than hardy perennials. The reason is this. The experts who use the technical terms of bridge, law, chemistry and plumbing learn to employ these terms partly from official instructions but largely by directly engaging in the special techniques and by directly dealing with the special materials or objects of their specialism. They familiarise themselves with the harness by having to drive their (to us unfamiliar) horses.

But the terms of art of philosophy itself (save for those of formal

logic), are not like this. There is no peculiar field of knowledge or adeptness in which philosophers *ex officio* make themselves the experts—except of course the business of philosophising itself. We know by what special sorts of work mastery is acquired of the concepts of *finesse*, *tort*, *sulphanilamide* and *valve-seating*. But by what corresponding special sorts of work do philosophers get their supposed corresponding mastery of the concepts of *Cognition*, *Sensation*, *Secondary Qualities* and *Essences*? What exercises and predicaments have forced them to learn just how to use and how not to misuse these terms?

Philosopher's arguments which turn on these terms are apt, sooner or later, to start to rotate idly. There is nothing to make them point north rather than nor'-nor'-east. The bridge-player cannot play fast and loose with the concepts of *finesse* and *revoke*. If he tries to make them work in a way palatable to him, they jib. The unofficial terms of everyday discourse are like the official terms of specialisms in this important respect. They too jib, if maltreated. It is no more possible to say that someone knows something to be the case which is not so than it is possible to say that the player of the first card in a game of bridge has revoked. We have had to learn in the hard school of daily life how to deploy the verb 'know'; and we have had to learn at the bridge-table how to deploy the verb 'revoke'. There is no such hard school in which to learn how to deploy the verbs 'cognize' and 'sense'. These go through what motions we care to require of them, which means that they have acquired no discipline of their own at all. So the philosophical arguments, which are supposed to deploy these units, win and lose no fights, since these units have no fight in them. Hence, the appeal from philosophical jargon to the expressions which we have all had to learn to use properly (as the chess-player has had to learn the moves of his pieces) is often one well worth making; where a corresponding appeal to the vocabulary of Everyman from the official parlance of a science, of a game or of law would often, not always, be ridiculous. One contrast of 'ordinary' (in the phrase 'ordinary language') is with 'philosophers' jargon'.

(b) But now for quite a different point and one of considerable contemporary importance. The appeal to what we do and do not say, or can and cannot say, is often stoutly resisted by the protago-

nists of one special doctrine, and stoutly pressed by its antagonists. This doctrine is the doctrine that philosophical disputes can and should be settled by formalising the warring theses. A theory is formalised when it is translated out of the natural language (un-technical, technical or semi-technical), in which it was originally excogitated, into a deliberately constructed notation, the notation, perhaps of *Principia Mathematica*. The logic of a theoretical position can, it is claimed, be regularised by stretching its non-formal concepts between the topic-neutral logical constants whose conduct in inferences is regulated by set drills. Formalisation will replace logical perplexities by logical problems amenable to known and teachable procedures of calculation. Thus one contrast of 'ordinary' (in the phrase 'ordinary language') is with 'notational'.

Of those to whom this, the formaliser's dream, appears a mere dream (I am one of them), some maintain that the logic of everyday statements and even the logic of the statements of scientists, lawyers, historians and bridge-players cannot in principle be adequately represented by the formulae of formal logic. The so-called logical constants do indeed have, partly by deliberate prescription, their scheduled logical powers; but the non-formal expressions both of everyday discourse and of technical discourse have their own unscheduled logical powers, and these are not reducible without remainder to those of the carefully wired marionettes of formal logic. The title of a novel by A. E. W. Mason 'They Wouldn't be Chessmen' applies well to both the technical and the untechnical expressions of professional and daily life. This is not to say that the examination of the logical behaviour of the terms of non-notational discourse is not assisted by studies in formal logic. Of course it is. So may chess-playing assist generals, though waging campaigns cannot be replaced by playing games of chess.

I do not want here to thrash out this important issue. I want only to show that resistance to one sort of appeal to ordinary language ought to involve championing the programme of formalisation. 'Back to ordinary language' can be (but often is not) the slogan of those who have awoken from the formaliser's dream. This slogan, so used, should be repudiated only by those who hope to replace philosophising by reckoning.

## VERDICT

Well, then, has philosophy got something to do with the use of expressions or hasn't it? To ask this is simply to ask whether conceptual discussions, i.e., discussions about the concept of, say, *voluntariness*, *infinitesimals*, *number* or *cause*, come under the heading of philosophical discussions. Of course they do. They always have done, and they have not stopped doing so now.

Whether we gain more than we lose by sedulously advertising the fact that what we are investigating is the stock way of operating with, say, the word 'cause', depends a good deal on the context of the discussions and the intellectual habits of the people with whom we are discussing it. It is certainly a long-winded way of announcing what we are doing; and inverted commas are certainly vexatious to the eye. But, more important than these nuisances, preoccupation with questions about methods tends to distract us from prosecuting the methods themselves. We run, as a rule, worse, not better, if we think a lot about our feet. So let us, at least on alternate days, speak instead of investigating the concept of *causation*. Or, better still, let us, on those days, not speak of it at all but just do it.

But the more longwinded idiom has some big compensating advantages. If we are enquiring into problems of perception, i.e., discussing questions about the concepts of seeing, hearing and smelling, we may be taken to be tackling the questions of opticians, neuro-physiologists or psychologists, and even fall into this mistake ourselves. It is then salutary to keep on reminding ourselves and one another that what we are after is accounts of how certain words work, namely words like 'see', 'look', 'overlook', 'blind', 'visualise' and lots of other affiliated expressions.

One last point. I have talked in general terms about learning and describing the modes of employment of expressions. But there are many different dimensions of these modes, only some of which are of interest to philosophers. Differences of stylistic elegance, rhetorical persuasiveness, and social propriety need to be considered, but not, save *per accidens*, by philosophers. Churchill would have made a rhetorical blunder if he had said, instead of 'We shall fight them on the beaches . . .', 'We shall fight them on the sands . . .'. 'Sands' would have raised thoughts of children's holidays at Skegness. But

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this kind of misemployment of 'sands' is not the kind of mishandling that interests us. We are interested in the informal logic of the employment of expressions, the nature of the logical howlers that people do or might commit if they strung their words together in certain ways, or, more positively, in the logical force that expressions have as components of theories and as pivots of concrete arguments. That is why, in our discussions, we argue *with* expressions and *about* those expressions in one and the same breath. We are trying to register what we are exhibiting; to codify the very logical codes which we are then and there observing.

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