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Sense and Sensibility

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. . . his words are like the images of Silenus which open; they are ridiculous when you first hear them; he clothes himself in language that is like the skin of the wanton satyr—for his talk is of pack-asses and smiths and cobblers and carriers, and he is always repeating the same things in the same words, so that any ignorant or inexperienced person might feel disposed to laugh at him; but he who opens the bust and sees what is within will find that they are the only words which have a meaning in them, and also the most divine, abounding in fair images of virtue, and of the widest comprehension, or rather extending to the whole duty of a good and honourable man.

(*Symposium*, Plato)

It is no secret that philosophy has gone out of the marketplace, nor has it shown up recently in the councils of kings. There seems some justified confusion, if not complaint, among an intelligent and educated public that philosophy has become a private matter among academic professionals. Even then, it often seems to reduce to linguistic scepticism or solipsism. This confusion is also felt among some philosophers. It is tied up somehow with both the conviction and disappointment that the domain of philosophy is neither the world nor the mind—that philosophy is indeed, as an academic majority contend, merely *about language*. This claim, however, is, if not wrong, at least misleading. I want in what follows to see if I can help to correct, or at least clarify, this view of the relation between philosophy and language. The result may not return philosophy to an over-crowded marketplace, nor to empty palaces, but I hope it will do something to restore conviction among some philosophers that what we are about can and does make a difference to more than ourselves.

This is an era, stretching into an age, of “meta-philosophy”. The commonplace (if mistaken) tendency among academics to think of philosophy as about language may usefully describe what fills professional journals, but it is deeply dissatisfying to those who have identified with a different, older tradition. Even so, there is, and has been from the beginning, unquestionably an intimate relation between philosophy and language. Analytic philosophy, we might say, has become obsessed with detailing this

relationship. It is, I think, both the detail and the obsession which is at the heart of complaints from outside philosophy.

What I will try to offer is a view from the bridge, a kind of general view of philosophy and language, aided by the work of two of the most seminal writers within the tradition of which I am here being critical: Ludwig Wittgenstein and O.K. Bouwsma. I should say at the outset I am well aware both were hostile toward high-bridge reviews, but I know of no other way to proceed.

Both Wittgenstein and Bouwsma were “ordinary language philosophers”, which I take to be a contemporary name for a kind of oral tradition in philosophy, the classical model of which has been the activity of Socrates. These two writers and this tradition will be the focus of what is constructive and the source of what is sound in my remarks about philosophy and language.

The written work of both Wittgenstein and Bouwsma was devoted to the question (and confusions) of what it is we are doing as philosophers. These were philosophers speaking to philosophers about philosophy. In this respect, they too seem subject to the “privatism” complaint. But the work of these men goes to the heart of the issue which seems to separate the concerns of philosophers and common men. They confronted (as now every philosopher must) a puzzle and predicament: philosophers seem to be born with grey hair and with nothing but language to contend with the world.

Analytic philosophy seems to hold that the naivete of earlier philosophers led them to believe they were pursuing truth about the world. Modern insight, to the contrary, dictates that philosophical statements so far as they are ever intelligible are not about the world, but about language. This means, e.g., that Plato’s *Republic*, so far as it is philosophical, is not about justice, but about the concept “justice”—how the word is used or abused. The resulting conviction is that whatever the task of the politician may be, the confinements of the philosopher are clear: his proper business is limited to comments about language.

There is really nothing much new or even modern in this position. Plato had already worried about the “bald-headed tinkers” bandying words; Nietzsche had bemoaned the “epigoni”. It now only turns out that if ordinary man was thrice removed from truth, the modern philosopher seems twice removed from ordinary man and no closer to the truth. To the ancient and traditional predicament the modern philosopher has added only his painful self-conscious awareness: “The language is too much with us!”. I said there has been a felt retreat from the ordinary affairs of men on the part of philosophers, on both a practical and conceptual

level—a separation felt both by philosophers and “ordinary men”. This separation is codified in the conviction that philosophy is *about* language.

I believe the work of Wittgenstein and Bouwsma provides a bridge of sorts, a way of bringing together the concerns of ordinary men and the activity of the philosopher. Their work has root in the Socratic concern that philosophy make a difference in the lives of men, but it fully concedes the linguistic nature of philosophical activity. The answer to the question, “What is it we are doing, as philosophers?” is the same for both men, and expresses what I believe is crucial to the ordinary language or what I have called an oral tradition in philosophy: the “love of wisdom” which gives philosophy its name, is the pursuit not of truth, but of sense.

The perhaps disappointing realisation that philosophy has no access to truth about the world is no reason to abandon the world, nor for that matter, to abandon truth about the world in favour of something else, say, truth about language.

It is my conviction that a passion for *sense* has always been the spur of philosophical genius and genuine philosophical activity. In saying this, I presume acknowledgement that philosophy does not take up the whole space or energy of any life—not even that of Socrates. A passion for justice, for beauty and truth are the investments we make, or fail to make, in our lives as fathers and friends, politicians and enemies. But the philosopher sets himself apart, as a philosopher, in that his concern is everywhere to centre an issue within the discernable boundaries of *sense*. While Socrates is a model, what has endured in the tradition of western philosophy supports the model. For example, the result of nearly every Platonic dialogue is the same (which, if one expected truth might appear no result at all): we do not have an answer, only a better understanding of the question, and of ourselves for having asked the question.

The lesson we are to learn from engagement with Socrates seems to be this: the truth is not within our command, *only sense*. Or to put the same lesson in terms of a later expression: Truth, like Grace, we may with effort come to recognise and receive; but no man commands it. The promise of the Socratic teaching seems to be that if one strives for sense, the truth may emerge.

Analytic philosophy, in my overview, has learned this well enough, but to avoid folly has fallen into absurdity. It is a little like the baby-bathwater problem. The philosopher must abandon a certain authority concerning truth, but he must not thereby abandon his responsibility to sense and sensibility. It is this latter responsibility which Wittgenstein and Bouwsma have preserved in

“ordinary language philosophy”. Such philosophy centres in the activities and aspirations, as well as the language of “ordinary life”. “Ordinary language”, by the way, is a kind of code word for *talking* sense—it has its home in the context of spoken rather than written language. Wittgenstein and Bouwsma had, I believe, a deep suspicion about the pitfalls and traps of written language, especially of a seductive tendency of philosophical thinking to fall into a sullen, silent world of extended monologue.

It must have occurred to more than one philosopher in what I am calling an oral tradition that philosophy cannot be written; it can only be spoken. In any event, what sets ordinary language philosophy apart from the estrangement suffered by analytic philosophy (and keeps it within the domain of public interest and concern) is the genuine belief that, if indeed the form and substance of philosophy is language, its life is *speech*. I am no historian, but I’d wager odds that throughout western history whenever culture comes to a kind of moral or intellectual impasse, especially in its written documents and formal institutions, there ensues a return to some form of oral tradition which serves to re-vitalize the intellectual and spiritual tradition ground down through the abuse, standardisation, and institutionalisation of language.

I want to try to make clear and explicit the connection between philosophy and sense, or more particularly “ordinary language philosophy” and standards of sense and sensibility. Ordinary language, of course, does not so much establish the *limits* of sense as it does *centre* it. The “ordinary” is not what we aspire to, but centre in. So too, sensibility is not a *goal* in life—at least not for most of us—but given the human tendency to abuse power (whether of arms or language), it is the common resource to which we must at least occasionally hold ourselves and each other.

As a matter of everyday concern, sense and sensibility are mostly a matter of convenience. But while it is not crucial, or even desirable to be always in agreement, it may become critical to understand disagreements. It is in such practical imperatives that philosophy—and this includes analytic or linguistic philosophy—readily finds its tie which binds, an indissoluble union in and with the affairs of men, its bondage to the world. It is arguable, in this way, that philosophy is burdened with a practical moral imperative: to ensure a basis for understanding disagreements. In the end this is far more fundamental and important than constituting any authority for settling disagreements. This shows, I believe, the moral priority of sense

over truth, one which we would do well to better understand. It is a way in which philosophy can and does make a difference.

The following crude, but I hope obvious and self-recommending, example may help to show both the practical relevance and sense-centering function of ordinary language philosophy. Consider the simple and general distinctions which any speaker of the language learns and easily understands:

- We cut a Flower.
- We kill an animal.
- We murder a human being.

It will be apparent, I think, that this arrangement of sentences which makes distinctions could become the basis for a lecture or an essay in meta-ethics or meta-physics. But, of course, the distinctions themselves are made *in* ordinary language, and indeed one could very well argue that even the “priority ranking” suggested by such serial expression is also reflected in the language generally and not merely forced by philosophical yoking. But quite apart from philosophical subtleties (or banalities), it is clear that ordinary language is deeply philosophical: these expressions and distinctions tell us a great deal about how we look at the world, how we feel about and act toward ourselves relative to the things and beings which are in that world.

The point of primary concern, however, is that in making these distinctions clear, we help to establish the limits of sense and standards of sensibility. We do *not* thereby establish truth, nor can these distinctions legitimately put an end either to argument or inquiry.

It is in such ways, I hope you will agree, that philosophy—at least ordinary language philosophy—can centre sense and nourish sensibility. In the homely and over-simple example I have given, the only philosophical activity is in the arrangement of distinctions already codified in ordinary speech. Such philosophical activity is merited normally only for a particular purpose, e.g. to establish a frame of reference within which a discussion can proceed, a decision be made. The present example is admittedly crude and would require some ingenuity in giving a concrete context, but I expect the reader could provide one, even for one so general.

Ordinary language, the language we *speak*, here as elsewhere, provides not a philosophical standard for truth, but a foundation for sense—it expresses a standard of sensibility shared by a community of human beings who speak this language.

I have put a good deal of emphasis on the difference between spoken and written language, and the relative trust one may have

that the spoken language reflects sense. I do not mean to be foolish: of course one can (people do) write sense; one can (people do) talk nonsense. Both Wittgenstein and Bouwsma indeed held that the surest training for talking sense was to write it. My emphasis on spoken language or oral context is only that one must, as Socrates did, hold not only to what is common, but to what is *living* in our language, especially *when the issue is sense*.

The importance of all this, I hope, will be apparent. Surely a major issue today—intellectually, culturally, spiritually—is that of sense. To put it negatively, ours no less than Socrates', is a time in which sense and sensibility suffer from a devaluation of language. Whether that in turn is a result of aesthetic exhilaration or moral exhaustion is hard to determine, but the philosophical imperative is the same. When cultures and sub-cultures contend for dominance by claim to public or private truth, the best recourse, perhaps the only one, is a return to sense. Socrates showed by example that, when one has lost confidence in who commands the authority of truth, a reasonable philosophical strategy is to relinquish the idea of truth (Socratic Ignorance) and inquire rather into the business of sense.

This is the genesis of Socratic philosophy. It is also what Wittgenstein and Bouwsma were about, and there is a whole tradition in philosophy, centering in Socrates, of which they form a part of and continuance. I have called this an “oral” tradition, and perhaps that is somewhat misleading, although I have tried to explain what I mean.

I will try now to summarise a view of analytic philosophy, of which “ordinary language philosophy” is a small and more vital part. It has essentially two roots. The first is a *dialogical* tradition, centering in the life of Socrates: its central concern is sense. The second is a *dialectical* tradition, centering in the formal reconstructions of Plato: its central concern is truth. In both traditions there is an idea of movement, of interchange, of life—but one is actual and real, the other abstract and imagined. In both traditions, however, the socket in which everything turns is language. The only question is how to breathe life into language to preserve sense. To that question Wittgenstein and Bouwsma have made answer.

Concluding, I want to set out in series, some remarks ancient and current, which I take to connect philosophy and language in a way which supports my remarks on the primacy of “ordinary language” and philosophical sense. They serve to connect, for me, a framework of an informal tradition within which I believe many, many of us as philosophers work. This series also has functioned as the parameter of my thinking in this essay. I hope the “citations”

will be familiar to you. I make no claim to textual accuracy, but I most certainly do to arguable philosophical sense.

1. Man (Df.) is an animal with speech. (Aristotle)¹
2. We look at the world through our language. (Aristotle)²
3. To speak a language is to become a part of a human community. (Aristotle)³
4. We learn virtue, as we learn to speak our language. (Plato)⁴
5. Ordinary language (speech) is all right. (Wittgenstein)⁵
6. Of what we cannot speak, we must remain silent. (Wittgenstein)^{6/7}

I give only a short comment on the connections I have in mind: Aristotle and Plato already express not only the intimate connection of philosophy and language, but of the very dependency of human beings for identity and community on the vital activity of speech. Wittgenstein emerges, of course, at the other end of the philosophical tradition, still concerned with this intimate relation of language and life, but now facing the tangles of language turned on itself—the “linguistic predicament” I referred to in the opening part of this essay. Wittgenstein’s remark that “we feel as if we had to repair a spider’s web with our fingers” is a poignant expression of the predicament. He does, however, have an answer to the entanglement of the mind in its

¹ *Politics*, I, 1253^a, 10.

² *Organon*, et al.

³ *Nicomachean Ethics*, et al.

⁴ *Protagoras*

⁵ *The Blue Book*, p. 28.

⁶ *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Prop. 7

⁷ These “citations” are offered neither as proof nor evidence of an oral tradition. They are framed to present a way of understanding, of reading, out a certain view of the centrality and continuity of spoken language within our common philosophical heritage. Number’s 2-4 are not direct quotations, and/require some comment’ perhaps separate essays. The language in each is my invention, but I believe they are defensible renderings of well known texts

Number’s 2 and 3 represent the sense of Aristotle’s views on the priority, and the integrative nature of language in *human* life and community. Certainly my emphasis on *speech* is viable. Aristotle surely did not intend to make “humanness” depend on the ability to *write*, nor imagine the life of a community contingent upon memorandums; that remained for a much later civilisation, one far removed from the *polis*.

Number 4: Plato has Protagoras respond to Socrates’ query “Who are the teachers of virtue?” with an answering question: “Who are the teachers of Greek?”. This is more than rhetoric, and more than a nod by Plato to what was substantial within the Sophistic tradition. My extrapolation of this exchange into the form of a claim by Plato, for the purposes I’ve stated will I hope pass without a compromise of philosophical sense.

More broadly and importantly, I hope the method of framing and the sense of this series of remarks will be self-recommending in terms of your own reading of these philosophers.

own making: return to sense, to ordinary language; that is enough, that alone can restore sensibility.

Wittgenstein also has a kind of simple enabling dictum to effect a return to philosophical sense, one which Bouwsma in turn simplifies. So, to the above series of remarks add:

7. “Don’t think, look!” (Wittgenstein)
8. “Don’t look, listen!” (Bouwsma)

These are both remarks about language and sense, warnings to philosophers about the limits of language, and signposts for sensibility. However, it is important to understand that neither Wittgenstein nor Bouwsma were warning us to act rather than think. Their abrupt remarks are not directions (directly) on how to live, or live better lives. The prescriptions remain essentially philosophical. They are not, e. g., on the practical (sceptical) reminder-level of Hume’s “Remember to leave by the first floor door”.

This may, in the end, seem once again to “limit” philosophy to language. But that is, finally, the point. The domain of language—spoken, shared language—is the domain of sense and sensibility. Whatever is invented or created must grow from the germ. To fully realise the limits of language is to fully empower the speaker: that is the substance of Socratic Ignorance, and also, of course, Socratic wisdom.

In an age and in a profession where the inclination is to say everything, it is remarkable surely to find a thinker or two who insist, to the contrary, that the more difficult and important thing is to say *something*, or better, to show the *sense* in *anything*. This is what I take ordinary language philosophy to be—a corrective to the extravagance of our time. It is, undeniably, a step backwards: from truth to sense. But it is what our time requires. There is an adage I’ll borrow from current therapeutic practice to close, one which fits: “Sometimes, the only way to catch up is to slow down”.

I want finally to say something personal about Oets Bouwsma in connection with the above, since this is an issue of this journal dedicated to him. He spent his life in thoughtful and vigorous pursuit of what everyone else around him already had—or thought they had. He strove for *sense*, where other philosophers presupposed it. I’m not sure whether or not he thought truth was out of reach. One thing is certain: he regarded philosophy, genuine philosophy, as the pursuit of sense in the service of truth. None of us who knew him well learned less, nor I expect any more, than that.

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