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Language and Reality

Does language simply reflect the world in which we live, or instead shape it so that we see things differently as a result of using one language to express ourselves rather than another? On the basis both of personal experience and of the conclusions reached by some major European philosophers, I would say "yes" to the second alternative. With respect to personal experience, for example, in the 1960s after being ordained a priest at a Jesuit seminary here in the United States, I received permission from my religious superiors to do a final year of spiritual reflection and pastoral training in Austria and then to study for a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Freiburg in southwest Germany. Both in Austria and above all in Germany, I confronted not just a problem of translating English into German but a new and different way of looking at reality. At least in a formal academic context, use of the German language is very orderly and precise with the verb normally at the end of a sentence rather than closely connected to the noun or grammatical subject of the sentence at or near its beginning. For a foreigner like myself, there

was a regular tendency to forget what verb I originally planned to use at the end of the sentence that I was currently speaking. In addition, I quickly realized that the German language readily lends itself to logical abstractions; verbs are easily converted into nouns, by adding a customary prefix or suffix to the verb. It was no wonder to me that academically oriented Germans became world renowned as theoreticians: in the humanities as philosophers and theologians and in the natural sciences as mathematicians and natural scientists.

At the same time, German preoccupation with orderly and precise language seems to have inspired a number of German philosophers and theologians in the twentieth century to study carefully the influence of language on human thinking and behavior. Martin Heidegger, the author of the groundbreaking book in phenomenology and existentialism *Being and Time*, referred to language as "the house of Being."[1] By that he presumably meant that Being or the world in which we live presents itself to us in and through language. Hence, the reality of the world in our experience is radically shaped by the language we use to describe it. Similarly, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Heidegger's student and junior colleague in philosophical studies, first at Freiburg and later at Marburg University in Germany, saw the connection between language and reality in much the same way. In his book *Truth and Method*, for example, he says: "[M]an's being-in-the-world is primordially linguistic."[2] That is, without language as a way to communicate personal thoughts and feelings, a human being is totally isolated from others and even from him- or herself. Finally, the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in his book *Philosophical Investigations*, originally

1. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 254, 272.
2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edition, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 443.

published in 1953 after his death, refers to language as a "game," that is, as an activity or form of life.[3] In other words, language has many more uses in human life than simply direct communication of information.

Naturally, still other twentieth-century philosophers who are not Germans, such as Paul Ricoeur in France and Alfred North Whitehead in Great Britain, both of whom lived and worked in the United States later in life, have analyzed carefully both the underlying structure of language and the way it influences human thinking and behavior. So the so-called "linguistic turn" in twentieth-century philosophy has had an enduring influence on our Western way of life. This is not to claim, of course, that we are completely determined in our understanding of reality by the language that we use. Nor is it to claim that outside of our own language context we find it virtually impossible to communicate with people using another language. I myself, for example, learned over time to think, talk, and write reasonably well in German so that to this day certain German words and phrases come more readily to mind than their English equivalents. Furthermore, much of basic interpersonal communication is grounded in feeling even more than in concepts and words. These feelings, to be sure, are themselves conditioned by our cultural upbringing, which in turn is partly shaped by the language that we habitually speak. But certain primitive feelings, for example, love, hate, joy, and sorrow, seem to transcend the limitations of language since they are personally felt and mutually shared through the body with its gestures and facial expressions rather than through the mind with explicitly verbal communication. Nonverbal symbolism, in other words, with its strong appeal to the memory and imagination of a human being, is just as powerful as the

3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 23.

spoken word in expressing how we think and feel about life going on around us and how we share it with others.[4]

But, to return to the question that I posed in the Introduction and again at the beginning of this chapter, does language not just reflect but actually shape the way that we experience reality? In particular, does an unconscious focus on nouns shape one way of looking at the world and an implicit focus on verbs reveal still another way? Here too I say "yes." A focus on nouns subtly induces one to look for ongoing permanence within the flow of experience; a focus on verbs leads one to see ongoing change as more persistent than permanence within human experience of reality. Clearly, both change and permanence characterize our human experience of ourselves, others, and the world. But in the end one finds what one is already unconsciously looking for and instinctively comes to the conclusion that this is the way things are. To make this point more obvious, I now briefly review the history of Western philosophy.

From Plato to Kant

Prior to the time of Aristotle and Plato there were already various schools of thought among the ancient Greeks on the nature of physical reality, different philosophical cosmologies. Two of the more prominent schools of thought were represented by Heraclitus and Parmenides, who held opposite views about the nature of reality. Heraclitus is quoted by Plato in the dialogue *Cratylus*[5] to the effect that no one ever steps into the same river twice. So for Heraclitus the only thing that is permanent is ongoing change. Parmenides, on

4. Alfred North Whitehead, *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1985), 60–88.
5. Plato, "Cratylus," in *The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 402A.

the contrary, believed that all change in this world is illusory. Being really exists; nonbeing does not exist except in thought. Hence, being is timeless, permanent, and unchanging. Put otherwise, Heraclitus believed in the unity of opposites, change and permanence being two dimensions of one and the same reality. Parmenides believed that reality is one-dimensional. Permanence is real; change is illusory. Plato favored the view of Parmenides over that of Heraclitus but still wanted to give due credit to Heraclitus' intuition that change is a constant feature of human experience of the world. So, in his celebrated analogy of the cave in *The Republic*, he distinguished between Being and Becoming, with Being characterizing reality and Becoming linked to appearance. Using their minds properly, human beings can attain certain knowledge of the unchanging intelligible Forms of things. In sense experience, on the contrary, human beings are only dealing with the constantly changing appearances or contingent manifestations of these unchanging Forms.[6]

Plato's disciple, Aristotle, was more of a naturalist, a close student of the physical appearance and activity of things, than Plato who was an idealist, interested in the unchanging Forms of things. So Aristotle gave a new meaning to Plato's doctrine of unchanging Forms. They do not primarily exist as intelligible structures apart from the things in which they are manifested, but exist in things as their unchanging substantial form or essence.[7] As such, they have contingent properties that vary from individual to individual and even over time within one and the same individual entity at different stages of its development (e.g., youth as opposed to old age within human beings and other animal species). But what gives things their "suchness" or universal intelligibility is their substantial form, which can be grasped by the

6. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 509D–511B, 514A–521B.
7. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hippocratus G. Apostle (Grinnel, IA: Peripatetic, 1979), 1038B–1041B.

human mind as a reality underlying all the contingent properties of the thing. In turn, this insight led to Aristotle's exposition of formal logic, the relationship of unchanging grammatical subjects to their ever-changing verbs or predicates within sentences. This prioritizing of unchanging subjects of sentences over the ever-changing verbs that express their contingent existence and activity has had enormous influence on Western culture. For our purposes in this chapter, it leads us to assume without question that our conventional way of speaking reflects the way that things are. Only with the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant in the late eighteenth century and, above all, with the controversial issues associated with subatomic physics (e.g., the wave/particle complementarity as the underlying character of reality at the quantum level) have we Westerners seriously begun to question this basic assumption that language closely reflects reality and reality is clearly reflected in the way that we conventionally use language.

To shift from Aristotle to Immanuel Kant, of course, leaves out much detail about the intermediate history of Western philosophy. But it is justified by the narrow focus of our search: namely, the proper relationship between the structure of language and the structure of reality. Thomas Aquinas and other medieval thinkers, for example, basically accepted the metaphysics of Aristotle as the basis for their own philosophical/theological reflections about the God-world relationship. The substantial forms or essences of things and their order to one another and to God were created by God as their source and final end. In the late Middle Ages, to be sure, William of Ockham challenged the Aristotelian/Thomistic presupposition that universal ideas in the mind correspond to the essences of things outside the mind. From his perspective, universals are simply mental constructs for cataloguing and ordering to one another empirical data. This emphasis on particular things rather

than their universal essences helped to establish the growth of early modern natural science. But early natural scientists like Galileo and Newton not only studied individual things in terms of their physical appearances; they used mathematics to formulate the laws of nature governing those things. Thus a new form of universal statements arose, grounded in mathematically formulated relations between empirical things rather than in *a priori* relations between universal ideas. Yet, even with this new methodology for studying the workings of nature, not only natural scientists but everyone else as well believed that the human mind is still in regular contact with reality itself.[8]

William of Ockham's challenge to the classical assumption that universals in the mind directly correspond to the essences of things in nature, however, did not get lost. The suspicion was growing that maybe all we know are our own subjective ideas about things. For example, René Descartes, a brilliant French mathematician, and John Locke, a celebrated English physician, questioned whether we know things in themselves or only our clear and distinct ideas about them.[9] This still assumes, of course, that there is a direct correspondence between these clear and distinct ideas in the mind and the physical things of this world. For Descartes, rational reflection would yield the needed clear and distinct idea corresponding to the essence of a physical reality. For Locke, being more empirically oriented, it was continued observation of the thing in question that would distinguish between its nominal and its real essence. But the Scottish philosopher David Hume questioned the assumptions of both Descartes and Locke. For he doubted whether or not there is any correspondence at all between ideas in the mind and the underlying essence of things

8. Joseph A. Bracken, *Subjectivity, Objectivity, and Intersubjectivity: A New Paradigm for Religion and Science* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation, 2009), 24–28.
9. Ibid., 28–37.

in nature. Hume claimed that all human knowledge is based on the succession of sense impressions in human consciousness which yield at best probabilities for their recurrence in nature. Likewise, given that the time-honored law of cause-and-effect is then no more than a fallible generalization from the succession of sense impressions in human consciousness, one cannot even be certain that there is an enduring self as source of human consciousness. Perhaps human consciousness is nothing more than a stage play without a script and without anyone in the audience to watch it.[10]

Immanuel Kant came to the rescue of the laws of nature and the legitimacy of natural science with his so-called Second Copernican Revolution. That is, just as Copernicus displaced the commonsense experience of the sun revolving around the earth (rising in the East and setting in the West) with his counterintuitive proposal that the earth rather revolves around the sun, so Kant proposed that the laws of nature come from the internal workings of human consciousness rather than from the external workings of nature. In his preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* he asserts: "Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them *a priori*, by reason of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the task of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge."[11]

As he explains, "reason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own"; hence, in dealing with nature, reason "must itself show the way with principles of judgment based upon fixed laws [of the mind], constraining nature to give answers to questions

10. Ibid., 42–46.
11. Immanuel Kant, *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1956), B:xvi. N. B.: "B" refers to the second edition of the *Critique*.

of reason's own determining."[12] Kant's presupposition in this hypothesis, of course, was that the laws of the human mind are *a priori* (already given) and universal, the way in which all human minds necessarily work in dealing with physical reality. Basically, Kant's proposal here simply reflected what was already being taken for granted by many natural scientists of his day in their dealing with physical reality. Likewise, it remains the standard procedure for natural scientists to this day. That is, a scientist first observes what is going on in nature at some time and place, conceives a hypothesis as to the natural laws that must be operative there, and finally tries to verify that hypothesis through a series of experiments on the empirical data. If the hypothesis reasonably matches what is going on in nature, then the scientist can claim that she has provisionally discovered a law of nature. It is a provisional truth rather than an absolutely certain law of nature because the scientist herself or someone else could at a later date come up with an even more satisfactory hypothesis to match the same empirical data and thus replace the current understanding of the law of nature.

Kant's thinking here, to be sure, sets up a tension between *phenomena*, the physical appearances of things, and the *noumena*, things in themselves apart from human experience. Even more mysterious are the workings of what Kant called the transcendental self,[13] the hidden source for all the mental categories that order the phenomena or physical appearances of things. Also presupposed, of course, are the Postulates of Practical Reason, the prerequisites of human morality: the nonempirical self, God, and the world as a totality or comprehensive whole.[14] So it is not surprising that the next generation of German philosophers (e.g., Fichte, Schelling, and

12. Ibid., xiii.
13. Ibid., 132.
14. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 234–35.

Hegel, the so-called German Idealists) tried to synthesize the phenomena and the noumena into a unified system in which God as transcendent Spirit is ultimately responsible for the existence of both. For our purposes in this chapter, what is most important here is that the things of this world are now being explained in terms of interrelated processes. Things are still things (substances); but the focus is now on an overall process of becoming, guided by the Divine Spirit. It was only at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, that reality became more and more defined in terms of Becoming (process or system) rather than Being (substance and accident as in classical metaphysics). Two prominent process-oriented philosophers of the first half of the twentieth century were Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead. Here I provide only a brief summary of their rival philosophical positions.

Two Contrasting Views on Movement

Both Bergson and Whitehead were convinced that the mechanistic worldview of early modern science (such as that espoused by Galileo, Newton, Robert Boyle, etc.) was well adapted to the mathematical analysis of the things of this world but that it only worked so well because scientists could thereby abstract from the full reality of those things. For, things in their full reality cannot be reduced to a set of equations governing their moving parts like the blueprint for automobiles to be produced on an assembly line. An individual thing, and in its own way all of nature, is built like an organism, a whole or totality that is somehow more than simply the sum of its parts as is the case in the functioning of a properly assembled machine. But if individual things and nature as a whole are in this way alive, not dead, then a new worldview, a new sense of how things operate in conjunction with one another, is needed. But what should be

that new worldview based on principles of Becoming rather than of Being? Here is where Bergson and Whitehead dramatically differ.

In his book *The Creative Mind*, for example, Bergson describes the experience of movement in human consciousness as follows: "We shall think of all change, all movement, as being absolutely indivisible," something that cannot be divided into a series of points or spatial locations without ceasing thereby to be movement.[15] For, in this way movement as an intuitively experienced physical reality is lost. Movement is thereby reduced to "a position, then another position, and so on indefinitely. We say, it is true, that there must be something else, and that from one position to another there is the *passage* by which the interval is cleared. But as soon as we fix our attention on this passage, we immediately make of it a series of positions, even though we still admit that between two successive positions one must indeed assume a passage."[16] Given that presupposition, Bergson then stakes out his own metaphysical position: "There are changes, but there are underneath the change no things which change. There are movements, but there is no inert and invariable object which moves."[17] Much akin to the worldview of Heraclitus, therefore, everything flows; nothing endures.

Yet, from Whitehead's perspective, this is only half-true. Becoming is indeed ontologically prior to Being, but there are nevertheless beings, things that are the outcome here and now of an antecedent process of becoming. For this reason he stipulated that "the final real things of which the world is made up" are actual entities, momentary self-constituting subjects of experience that in rapid succession have as their conjoint effect the sense of a continuously existing organic reality or self. Moreover, since these

15. Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind [Pensée et le mouvant]*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Greenwood, 1968), 167–68.
16. Ibid., 171.
17. Ibid., 173.

actual entities or "actual occasions" of experience are self-constituting, the result of an internal process that in each case somehow takes account of the past but anticipates the future, Whitehead can still agree with Bergson that agents, entities that act, are the result rather than the source of action or movement. This is, to be sure, contrary to commonsense experience, which stipulates that things first exist and then perform certain actions. For example, in the picture books that teach young children how to read, the first picture is labeled "See Dick" and then second is titled "See Dick run." Likewise, as already noted, Aristotelian formal logic has heavily influenced the sentence structure of the various Western languages. Subjects of sentences are primary; verbs and other qualifiers are secondary. Subjects endure over time; predicates change over time. But Whitehead himself may have erred in the opposite direction. That is, he may have overemphasized the sheer multiplicity of actual entities and failed to make clear that in rapid succession they not only give the impression of movement to an outsider but in a carefully qualified sense (see below, chapter 2) constitute movement as a physical reality even for themselves as a "society" or closely knit aggregate of actual entities that share "a common element of form" or defining characteristic.[18]

From his own words, to be sure, it is clear that Whitehead did not want to reduce these "societies" to the sum of their component parts (their actual entities):

> The point of a "society," as the term is here used, is that it is self-sustaining; in other words, that it is its own reason. Thus a society is more than a set of entities to which the same class-name applies. . . . To constitute a society, the class-name has got to apply to each member by reason of genetic derivation from other members of that same society. The members of the society are alike because, by reason of their

18. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected edition, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 34.

> common character, they impose on other members of the society the conditions which lead to that likeness.[19]

The details of how actual entities, self-constituting subjects of experience, have internal rather than purely external relations to one another and thereby transmit from one set of actual entities to another this common element of form or common characteristic will be part of the subject matter of chapter 2. For now, it is only important to note how through the influence of Bergson and Whitehead and many other contemporary philosophers, the mindset of even the average person here in the West is that reality is not permanent or fixed but dynamic, always on the move. Change is not always welcome, but everyone senses that change is "the name of the game" for contemporary life in this world. In the remaining pages of this chapter, I indicate briefly how the naturalist Charles Darwin with his theory of natural selection in the workings of nature and how early twentieth-century theoretical physicists with their research on subatomic reality likewise have contributed to this new commonsense understanding of physical reality as constantly evolving and thus as significantly different from the classical worldview with its own emphasis on Being or permanence rather than on Becoming or change.

Darwin on Evolution

In his early years, Darwin first studied medicine at the urging of his father, himself a physician. Since the young Darwin disliked the practice of surgery, his father then arranged for him to study for the Anglican priesthood at Cambridge University. Here Darwin like every other seminarian was required to read William Paley's

19. Ibid., 89.