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Does philosophy need (its own) words?

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Abstract

Questions concerning the language – and writing – of philosophy are usually discussed in connection with a more fundamental alternative between orientations of philosophical work: to adopt, on the one hand, the methods and rigour of science; or to position oneself within the confines and structures of ordinary experience. In this paper, the focus will be on the difference between written symbols and auditory language as undercutting the opposition between the paradigms of scientific vs. ordinary language. Authors treated are Descartes, Kant, Wittgenstein, and Stanley Cavell.

Richard Heinrich: Does philosophy need (its own) words?[1]

1 Introduction

Let me say, at the beginning of my introductory remarks, a word about an issue I will not directly engage with, but which could be seen, from a certain point of view, as fundamental in the field: namely, whether philosophy needs to express itself in language at all (a closely related question would be whether philosophy can find its fulfillment – have its telos – in linguistic expression). These are not futile questions – think of oriental traditions of wisdom, European mystical traditions stemming from antiquity, or Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Now, as in my talk the difference between linguistic expression and non-linguistic symbolism will be of some importance, it would not have been altogether pointless for me to address those questions, for instance by inquiring about the difference between philosophy in a state of purely visual – say: written – symbolism on the one hand, and a state of radical silence or muteness on the other hand. But I won't touch those lofty questions directly.

I want to begin, instead, at the most humble reference point I could find for (the issue of) philosophy's words: with a dictionary. More specifically: the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* published in German in 13 volumes from 1971 to 2007, a truly great enterprise, unrivaled in richness of information and suggestions. In his general introductory essay, the principal editor, Joachim Ritter, a distinguished philosopher of the postwar-era, wrote about the relationships between Begriffsgeschichte (history of concepts), history of ideas, terminology and history of philosophy. At one point, he quotes Descartes: "Si de verborum significatione inter philosophos semper conveniret, fere omnes eorum controversiae tollerentur";[2] and he takes this as saying that with the achievement of an unambiguous terminology the ideal of perfect understandability would be reached. Now in my opinion this interpretation is facile and misleading in more than one way. First, it is simply not justified by the quotation. Agreement about the meaning of words is not dependent upon terminology; resting on tacit understanding it may still be a complete agreement (see the late Wittgenstein).

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[1] This paper was presented at the conference "Registers of Philosophy III.," May 13, 2017, Budapest, organized by the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Pázmány Péter Catholic University.

[2] Quoted in Joachim Ritter: "Vorwort" in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie,* Basel and Stuttgart: Schwabe & Co., 1971, volume 1, vii. "if there were always agreement among philosophers about the meanings of words, then almost all their controversies would be eliminated." (René Descartes: *Regulae ad directionem ingenii. Rules for the Direction of the Natural Intelligence*, trans. by George Hefferman, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998, 171.)

Second, Ritter treats the quotation as if it were a representative expression of Descartes' views on philosophical or even scientific method in general. But that is not so. The quotation is from a very specific context, where Descartes discusses the difference between authentic scientific problems and a certain kind of conundrum, where the puzzle can be completely removed by means of disambiguation of the meaning of a word. The application to philosophy is obvious, all the more so as Descartes habitually criticizes philosophers for their inability to agree about anything at all; it is not, anyhow, based on reflections pertaining to the core of his methodology. And that brings me to the third and most important disadvantage of Ritters interpretation: namely, that it obscures where the real issues in Descartes's views of the language of philosophy and its relationship to science lay. They were much more radical, calling into question the status of words as such, their relationships to language and figural (geometrical) imagination respectively. A rough sketch of these ideas is the first part of my talk; I will then comment on a rarely mentioned statement of Kant on the language of philosophy (although this part is the main focus of my talk it will be rather short); and finally I will scrutinize a few famous passages from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.

2 Descartes

2.1 Cognition and geometry

The early and unfinished project of Descartes I just mentioned was meant to establish what in our days is called a universal problem solver, a method which teaches us to solve every solvable problem by following a small number of rules and to decide of every posed problem whether it is solvable or not. I have to concentrate on two aspects relevant to our more general issues, without giving much of an explanation, let alone argument.

The first is that in Descartes's view, every problem which exceeds a certain (rather low) degree of formal complexity – regardless of the content – has to be represented in a geometrical model. Be it a mathematical question in the narrower sense, be it the question of financing a city's long-term investments in land reclamation by polder method, or be it blood-circulation – that makes no difference in this respect; only formal complexity counts. This is what everybody knows as Descartes's obsession with geometrization, most infamous with regard to physics, where it prevented him from properly distinguishing between kinetic and dynamic laws.

The second point is more subtle: Those methodological postulates are not just motivated by his fascination with mathematics; instead, they are based on explicit epistemological reflections, on a theory of cognition. What is crucial here is that he takes cognition itself as just such a problem – in fact: the first and foremost problem – of a degree of complexity which demands geometrical modeling. So, in his view, we do not dispose of a certain set of cognitive capacities which allow us to make use of geometrical models; rather, we can reach an understanding of our cognitive capacities only by representing them in a geometrical model. At this point, the connection with the issue of the language of philosophy should become apparent: because for Descartes this meant that he could rid himself of the whole of the traditional, Aristotelian theory and terminology of cognitive psychology. All those differences between modes of memory, sensory perception and modes of imagination he could let go overboard and replace them by the unique model of the extended body together with its geometrical structure. You can see that this theoretical move goes far beyond terminological reform – far beyond the methodological power of definitions etc. It is rather the transition, from a traditional technical language, to a radically different kind of language, a non-natural language – the language of geometry. This observation makes Ritter's statement look naive: what Descartes expects of philosophers (and scientists in general) is not just that they learn to agree, in the sense of terminological consistency, about the meaning of words in their common language; but rather that they unlearn this language, taken as a whole, and replace it by a radically different one (where, that's tacitly implied, questions of agreement about the meaning of words simply cannot arise anymore).

All this is not too far from common knowledge about Descartes; but its real meaning can only be appreciated when another, antecedent replacement is taken into account. And there, the language concerned was that of geometry itself. Behind Descartes's proposed revolution of philosophical language looms his prior revolution of the language of geometry.

2.2 Geometry and Algebra

Its famous result, analytic geometry, is among the great assets of our culture. Everybody can recite, on demand, at least a few of the most important keywords and the whole idea now seems completely natural. In reality, Descartes' invention of Analytic Geometry was a complex affair; but again, I'll have to limit myself to particular aspects. The first sentence of the treatise on Geometry reads: "Any problem in geometry can easily be reduced to such terms that a knowledge of the lengths of certain straight lines is sufficient for its construction".[3]

Here we have the core of the idea of Cartesian coordinates, the reduction of curves to relationships of lengths of straight lines, which is, in turn, the key to the expression of curves by equations; but in the first place we should read the sentence as a statement of the motive guiding the whole project: the unification of geometry, the building up of the whole of the science of geometry from two requirements: the idea of the straight line, and the congruence of segments of straight lines – i.e. the circle. This is what he had aimed at from the beginning, long before he found the solution; and this was basically a critical motive, directed against geometry's inner fragmentation in constructions with circle and ruler on the one hand, and constructions which presuppose the existence of conic sections on the other. Against an unfounded division of kinds of curves, only justified by tradition, I want to emphasize that already his earliest original ideas in geometry were aimed at the same goal as his epistemological project: elimination of unjustified divisions of genera and ad hoc-principles in favour of a unified construction of an epistemic field. What in the one case is the difference between memory, senses, imagination are in the other field the generic differences between straight line, circle, conic sections, and higher curves.

The second and – for my purposes – more important point is the reverse of the first. I quote from *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*:

> satis enim advertimus veteres Geometras analysi quadam usos fuisse, quam ad omnium problematum resolutionem extendebant, licet eamdem posteris inviderint. Et jam viget Arithmeticae genus quoddam, quod Algebram vocant, ad id praestandum circa numeros, quod veteres circa figura faciebant.[4]

A minute ago I spoke of the analysis of curves by means of equations – now progress is expected when arithmetic models itself on the paradigm of geometry. What does that mean? The idea is that algebra makes it possible, in number theory, to arrive at general propositions of the same kind as geometry when it says something valid for all squares by studying the relationships in one arbitrarily chosen square. We should be able, in arithmetic, to do

[3] René Descartes: *The geometry of René Descartes*. New York: Dover Publications, 1954, 2.

[4] René Descartes: *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*. Hamburg: Meiner, 2011, 26. "For we are all aware that the ancient geometers employed a kind of analysis which they extended to the resolution of all problems, although they may have begrudged leaving it to posterity. And now a certain sort of arithmetic, which one calls 'algebra', is flourishing, aiming to achieve that with respect to numbers which the ancients did with respect to figures." (Descartes: *Regulae ad directionem ingenii. Rules for the Direction of the Natural Intelligence*, 87.)

something like simply to write down an unspecified number, and to use it to say something valid for all numbers.

Now, as Descartes himself acknowledges, algebraic methods were already developed to a considerable degree in his time. A decisive step had been taken by Viète (1540-1603),[5] by representing not only unknown variables, but also given quantities by letters. In this way he let given numbers be undetermined, so that equations would express structural features valid for all numbers. That is the generality the ancients had only for geometry. The great achievements of Descartes himself in the field were general rules which make visible and transparent, within the symbolism, the inner construction of complex structures. This regards, for instance, the use of brackets, but also the possibility to immediately see the root in the symbol of a higher power. The writing of powers with natural numbers opens the possibility to do calculations with powers as numerically given in the same way as with their roots.

So these achievements are definitely not only facilitations on the notational level, they are substantial innovations. In fact, Descartes's *Geometry* is the first text in the history of that science we can read without having first to book a crash course in a dead language. And obviously reading here means not a discursive process of coordinating symbols with meanings different from themselves, but a process running on the symbolic level alone, firmly guided by intuition; it means the manipulation of symbols as such, in conformity with a set of syntactic rules. There is no reference to something external, and there are no relationships between the symbols, which would be determined by something else, invisible. Everything lies open to view – a first step in the transformation of the language of arithmetic into a calculus.

So we see what is at stake when Descartes says in the *Regulae* that every problem of a certain degree of complexity has to be represented in a mathematical model. It means that essential parts of natural or even technical language are going to be replaced by visually guided symbolism. It is more or less a matter of taste whether to speak of a symbolic language or rather of non-linguistic symbolism. In any case, at least with regard to Descartes, the revolution here is not a matter of language or symbols only, insofar as it changes things decisively on the epistemological level. But I cannot elaborate on these points.

2.3 Leibniz

[5] François Viète: *The Analytic Art*, trans. by T. Richard Witmer, Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1983.

Kant will say that the signs used by mathematics (quite different from ordinary discourse), in their visibility, are by themselves driving a process of reasoning. In the mathematical sign the general is visually present. That he is able to state this fact so clearly and assuredly is the consequence of a development which leads from Descartes to Leibniz who first realized its full significance.

Leibniz's big step forward was the idea that the power of symbolism does not rest alone in the ability to express in full transparency what it expresses, but that it, moreover, generates cognition, for instance in proofs. In a word: that the symbolism is productive, and that we do not have to think or to reason at every relevant stage in a complicated proof, but simply arrange symbols according to previously fixed rules.

Leibniz was perhaps the first to address, in full generality, the complex relationships now obtaining between calculus, ordinary language, and the language of philosophy. (In descending order: characteristica universalis, technical languages, ordinary language, dialects...).

2.4 Consequences

So if I may simplify a bit, we first see the language of mathematics being transformed into a calculus; in a second stage, the language of science in general is modeled after this symbolism. And then arises the question, if under these conditions philosophy can – and should – any longer understand itself as a science. To grasp the bearing of this question we only have to remind ourselves that up to the times of Descartes the logical-rhetorical structure that permeates the Aristotelian organon really was a common basis for all those disciplines: science proper (physics), mathematics, and philosophy.

Now, if we shudder to think that philosophy from now on should be of the same kind as mathematics (just not exactly the same thing – whatever that proviso may mean) – if we shudder at this thought, and if we hope instead for solace and comfort from the decision to do without the title of science, and if we therefore do not claim to have our own language, and instead will be content to have the language everybody has, ordinary language – then we should remind ourselves that the constitution of European philosophy in the work of Plato rested on a sharp distancing, on the part of philosophy, of itself from ordinary discourse, from the language of conjecture and mere opinion. Can philosophy abandon that claim? Are we in a double-bind then?

3 Kant

Kant was very much more intent on fundamental differences between mathematics and philosophy, with regard to methods of concept-formation than Descartes and even Leibniz. The decisive point for him, already in his pre-critical period, was that mathematics proceeds essentially by way of synthesis, building new concepts from given ones or by constructing its concepts directly in intuition; whereas philosophy is forever bound to the breaking down of given concepts into their components: analysis. Philosophy cannot make use of the axiomatic method, because it cannot even set out by giving real definitions. In philosophy, definitions – if possible at all – could only come at the end of a process of analysis.

Now, in the methodological part of the *Critique of Pure Reason* he dedicates a considerable number of pages to a discussion of the concept of a "dogma" (which is, as you know, a very important concept for him, because it is exactly in a conceptual slot between dogmatism and skepticism that he wants to position his leading idea of "critique"). What is at stake in those passages of the *Doctrine of Method* simply is philosophy's competence to establish (to assert) propositions with certainty. As there are no self-evident propositions in metaphysics, their certainty has to rest on a proof. But as there are no axioms in philosophy, its basic principles (Grundsätze, from which theorems could be proved) are not constructions from simple elements; they have to be proved themselves. But as demonstration would call for higher principles as premises, they cannot be demonstrated either. (As a matter of course, they cannot be proved from the principles of a different science – as this would make philosophy part of that other science.) This predicament is the reason why Kant, when he speaks of the proving of philosophical principles, does not use the word "demonstration", but "deduction":

> Discursive principles are therefore quite different from intuitive principles, that is, from axioms; and always require a deduction. Axioms, on the other hand, require no such deduction, and for the same reason are evident – a claim which the philosophical principles can never advance, however great their certainty.[6]

[6] Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Norman Kemp Smith, London: Macmillan Co., 1929, 589.

To be sure, “deduction” here cannot mean deductive inference. It stands for the desired way out of the double-bind that philosophy has to prove all its principles and at the same time cannot demonstrate them; it stands for a special type of argument by which philosophical principles can be justified in a rational way (transcendental arguments). I cannot go into the details. But let’s assume (with Kant) that this can be done. Then there is still another equally fundamental difference with regard to mathematics: it concerns the procedures of deriving propositions (theorems) from principles.

In mathematics every step in a proof can be controlled in intuition, and that is also valid in arithmetic, whose signs are concrete instances of its concepts. Kant says that only proofs of this intuitive kind can legitimately be called demonstrations. Philosophy, on the other hand, is incapable of such a procedure and has always to “treat the general in abstracto”. For philosophy, its (linguistic) signs are not concrete presentations of the general, but only reminders of the general. And therefore, the method of proof in philosophy is not demonstrative, but acroamatic. Its proofs have to be laid out in nothing but words:

> Mathematics alone, therefore, contains demonstrations, since it derives its knowledge not from concepts but from the construction of them, that is, from intuition, which can be given a priori in accordance with the concepts. Even the method of algebra with its equations, from which the correct answer, together with its proof, is deduced by reduction, is not indeed geometrical in nature, but is still constructive in a way characteristic of the science. The concepts attached to the symbols, especially concerning the relations of magnitudes, are presented in intuition; and this method, in addition to its heuristic advantages, secures all inferences against error by setting each one before our eyes. While philosophical knowledge must do without this advantage, inasmuch as it has always to consider the universal in abstracto (by means of concepts), mathematics can consider the universal in concreto (in the single intuition) and yet at the same time through pure a priori representation, whereby all errors are at once made evident. I should therefore prefer to call the first kind acroamatic (discursive) proofs, since they may be conducted by the agency of words alone (the object in thought), rather than demonstrations which, as the term itself indicates, proceed in and through the intuition of the object.[7]

[7] Ibid., 590.

“Akroaomai” means: hearing; suitable for hearing only. The contrast is to the visual. Philosophy’s language is oriented by hearing, not seeing or letting-see. This idea is interesting in many respects, and especially so when compared with Wittgenstein’s early philosophy: there, the language of philosophy is – if anything at all – a kind of “showing”. And it is for this reason that, in a way, taken as language, it is condemned to failure – “was gezeigt werden *kann, kann* nicht gesagt werden.”[8] One of the cases where the predominance of the non-verbal symbol seems to turn philosophy into silence or muteness.

Kant reminds us of philosophy’s dependency on a language of words; he warns us that the yearning for an idealized language beyond, an imitation of mathematics, will lead us astray. We cannot take this, although, as an opting for ordinary language, seen in contrast with scientific symbolism. Kant was, after all, committed to a view of philosophy as a scientific project. And he did not systematically reflect on philosophy’s relationship to its words. But we can take up the question in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy.

4 Wittgenstein

The later Wittgenstein certainly took sides with ordinary language as the alternative to scientific symbolism (which he had before his eyes in the form of Russell’s *Principia*). How does his aversion to explanation in philosophy connect with his philosophy of language, and to which degree is his later philosophy of language about philosophy’s language? And, finally, can he steer clear of the allegation of hollow conformism and opportunism which is regularly raised against philosophy when it seeks justification in the ordinary, in opinion as opposed to eternal truth, in description as opposed to explanation? I cannot answer those last questions, but I am convinced that the key lies in a closer examination of Wittgenstein’s understanding of the ordinary as such.

The allegation of conformism is usually based on passages like the following:

> 124. Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves

[8] Ludwig Wittgenstein: “Tractatus logico-philosophicus. Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung”, in: *Schriften 1,* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963, 33, 4.1212. “What can be shown, cannot be said.” (Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* trans. by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness London and New York: Routledge, 31, 4.1212.

everything as it is. It also leaves mathematics as it is, and no mathematical discovery can advance it. A "leading problem of mathematical logic" is for us a problem of mathematics like any other.[9]

Now one might find here a problem with the word "actual" ("actual use of language"), I mean: whether it can be taken as meaning the same as "ordinary". Because, even if we don't believe in wonders, there are certainly extraordinary facts to encounter in this (actual) world. But I think that in the given context we can indeed understand the actual or factual language as the ordinary. The last remark about mathematics points in this direction: Calculating is certainly, within the whole of ordinary language, something special, not to say: extraordinary. But now take Wittgenstein's criticism of (mainly Russellian) logicism: in his view, it is nothing but an artificial symbolic cover, wrapped around the actual mathematical symbolism. And that means: The ordinary use, procedures and language of mathematics.

So we can take him as meaning the ordinary when he speaks of the actual use of language in the above quotation. At the same time we should be warned by this observation that we must not take the ordinary of language as a certain realm of things or meanings language can be about. This is crucial for the reading of the following remark:

> 97. […] We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound, essential, in our investigation, resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language. That is, the order existing between the concepts of proposition, word, proof, truth, experience, and so on. This order is a super-order between – so to speak – super-concepts. Whereas, of course, if the words 'language', 'experience', 'world', have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words 'table', 'lamp', 'door'.[10]

It would be a great misunderstanding to think that the ordinary is the same as the realm of ordinary things (das Zuhandene in Heidegger). The ordinary is diverse, infinitely diverse. Numbers are extraordinary things, compared with dishwashers. But there is no hindrance to speak of the ordinary language of arithmetical calculations, as opposed to an artificial logical symbolism misleadingly presented as its foundation. The ordinary is by no means uniform. Let me now read a last remark from the *Philosophical Investigations*:

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[9] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Elizabeth Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell, 1958, 49.
[10] Ibid., 44.

> 116. When philosophers use a word – ‘knowledge’, ‘being’, ‘object’, ’I’, ‘proposition’, ‘name’ – and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home? – What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.[11]

Bringing words back home, back to their everyday use – that is not a recommendation of conformity. It is an expression of the desire to escape from the frenzy of metaphysical illusions, to free ourselves from the tendency to let thought run out of control, as Stanley Cavell put it, escape from the violence of thinking when it succumbs to the lure of idealization, as in Descartes’s sequence of unrestrained doubt in the *Meditations*. It is from the perspective of such uninhibited doubt that all differences between meanings, kinds of objects, modes of behavior tend to vanish, tend to uniformity. Whereas what Wittgenstein claims for ordinary language is richness of differences.

So we have to dissociate two aspects: the priority of description (over explanation or theory) on the one hand, and conformism on the other. What is to be described is differences and similarities – don’t forget that family resemblance, as a paradigm of comparison, is preserving difference.

I do not claim to have shown that Wittgenstein’s option for the ordinary (for the words of ordinary language) in philosophy, is the right or even ultimate answer to modern philosophy’s problem with its own language. But I hope to have at least given some reason not to discard his option solely on the grounds of an unjustified linking of the ordinary with conformism. Philosophy needs its own words as everybody – and every field of interest – needs their own words, against enforced conformism on the one hand, the ideal of a super-language on the other hand, which has no reference, no grounding at all, but is just the involuntary expression of a self-frustrating desire. As Stanley Cavell put it once when he explained his motives for writing “The Claim of Reason”: “to help bring the human voice back into philosophy”.[12]

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[11] Ibid., 48.

[12] Stanley Cavell: 1994. *A pitch of philosophy. Autobiographical exercises.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994, 58.