

A New Dynamism for Philosophy.

Chapter 4.

Meaning.

Key Questions: *What is meaning? What is the basic unit of meaning upon which language is built? Does the later Wittgenstein's influential linguistic approach to philosophy make a broader range of philosophical insights accessible? How do we locate the meaning of concepts, and how do they specify references in reality? How do common nouns and proper nouns differ? How do statements about concepts differ from statements about objects and their properties in reality? What is the relationship between an object and its properties?*

As an undergraduate and new to philosophy in the 1970s I was poorly prepared for my introductory term. I was new to the subject and it was the seventies. I had read a few of Bertrand Russell's early and popular writings on the history of the subject, some Descartes and a bit of Hume. Then I became restless. These would be enough to clear the ground or set up base camp for an assault upon the great questions that had been raised, but abandoned unanswered. Proud of sceptical and self consciously cynical attitude I had cultivated as a schoolboy, I sought impassioned debates on ultimate Reality and Truth that would engage us into the small hours and shake up the complacency of the academic establishment

There were sporadic discussions, an exciting evening's introduction to the Radical Philosophy movement, and the allure of a French Existentialism that seemed to transform philosophy into a way of life. But our little group soon attracted suspicion, derision and finally indifference. I had known nothing of the analytical approach to philosophy that had cocooned the subject long before, and found the social sciences flourishing under the influence of a reinvigorated Marxism and a Capitalist State convulsing in terminal crisis. We quite wrongly blamed Wittgenstein for the plight of our own subject. His later ideas enjoyed a continued pre-eminence and effectively suppressed the sort of exchanges we were desperate to provoke. The exasperating thing about Wittgenstein, we decided, was his resistance to the idea that philosophy could

contribute anything to the solution of the important questions. Worse were his assertions to the effect that the questions we were asking were not even genuine. They didn't even make sense.

Philosophy carried on. But its focus had become the concepts of everyday conversation. The much humbler role it had largely accepted was now to take concepts, compare and analyse the ways we use them. In part this project was undertaken to locate the conceptual confusions that still misled some of us into the naïve belief that we could use them to ask some really interesting questions. It was as though we had excitedly assembled for a major political demonstration, and found on arrival that our demands had been met some time before. We accepted the assurances, and that protest was pointless, but dispersed back to our routine studies, with a certain dissatisfaction, feeling that our aspirations were somehow unfulfilled.

Wittgenstein's later philosophy is labelled linguistic rather than analytic, because its more general focus on language: the manner in which it is used, the diversity of those uses and the descriptive approach it promotes. It is not as anti-philosophical as it first seems, and implicit in its observations are assumptions about experience and the world. This makes it a philosophical doctrine in the traditional sense, and it should be judged alongside those theories from which it has tried to distance itself.

One of the aims in this chapter will be to criticise the claims of linguistic philosophy and to lead into discussions of some of the most important questions concerning language and the World. The nature of meaning, of truth and the relationship between concept and reality are three such, and these continue into the following chapter. It will be just like the old days all over again!

One of the later Wittgenstein's major achievements was to get us to look at language in a new way. Earlier analytical philosophy, including the work of the young Wittgenstein himself, maintained that the symbols that make up a language derived their meanings from their correspondence with phenomena in reality. The philosophy endorsed truth in a correspondence theory, which prevails when the symbols of descriptive language match their counterparts in reality. One problem with this view is that of explaining how a false description can be meaningful, for any false statement remains meaningful, even if it corresponds to nothing in reality. Another is to locate phenomena that correspond to

relations, articles, prepositions and other lesser parts of speech. Analytical philosophy commits itself to a very ambitious programme of analysis and correspondence.

Wittgenstein foresaw some of the difficulties inherent in his programme. It had aimed to reduce the statements of ordinary language into elementary propositions with meanings guaranteed by the “atomic” entities they refer to or depict. Reluctant to pursue his colleague Russell into locating these “atoms” in consciousness, as items of sense experience, I am not sure he found any at all that his elementary propositions could locate. He consequently abandoned an analytical position and embraced a new conception of meaning and language. Importantly this involved making reference and description share centre stage with other language functions. Exclamation, warnings, and imperatives are equally important activities, all taking place and serving a variety of purposes within a social context. Meaning extends beyond language into this context where gestures, expressions and situation reinforce, supplement or replace word use. The meanings of words are provided by this context too, where Wittgenstein’s search for a reference is dropped in favour of observations upon the ways in which words are used and harnessed to the tasks that language performs. Wittgenstein still recognised the need for language to refer to reality, but realised that the relationship between words and their objects is less straightforward than analytic philosophy had supposed. His famous illustration of the word “game” revealed that no set of characteristics is both necessary and sufficient for an activity to qualify as a game. Some attributes predominate, such as being recreational, rule-governed, or competitive, but exceptions to all these can still be games. Looser ties or more complex relationships bring together different activities as diverse as patience and professional football under the same concept. Many of our concepts work in this way and our understanding of them does not consist of linking each concept word with a corresponding object, or to a rigid hierarchy of classified objects. For the later Wittgenstein the relationships of ordinary language with the world are quite different. Any lack of rigidity or uniformity that the examination of concepts exposes should no longer be seen as weaknesses or flaws for philosophy to rectify. Everyday language has become the makeshift tool of philosophical enquiry rather than its object.

Language does of course refer to reality, but Wittgenstein rejected his earlier view that a reference is a link forged between an empty language symbol and a corresponding object. He came to accept that language is inherently meaningful and rooted in the world through forming an integral part of our social lives. Meaning and reference are not the product of a linking process that takes place in an individual consciousness, but emerge from the roles that language can play alongside a range of meaningful and rule-governed activities. So meaning belongs inseparably to language conceived as essentially a social phenomenon. A significant implication of Wittgenstein's position is that a social context that supplies language is a requirement even for philosophical discussion to take place. An individual acting in isolation cannot create a subjective personal language exclusively for the purposes of recording private experiences. A self-evident idea perhaps, but one that contradicts a self-centred tradition in philosophy, that spans Descartes and his "Systematic Doubt" in the seventeenth century, and the programme of "Logical Atomism" promoted by Russell early in the twentieth. Supporting this idea is Wittgenstein's insistence on a further requirement of objectivity upon any language; this is one that a private language cannot meet.

A concept-based view of reality is implicit in this view of language. No longer does the reference of a noun, the object it refers to, define its meaning. Rather it is the other way about. It is the way a word is used that defines its reference. Only through the range of concepts that language makes available to us is reality conceivable at all. This is not such an original view, since it follows a tradition initiated by Kant, continued throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth in phenomenology, and post-structuralist philosophy. More radical were the implications for the practice of philosophy. In particular philosophy should concern itself with linguistic practices, the ways in which we teach and learn language, the conditions and rules that govern correct use. Because the meanings of words can never be more than the meanings which can be taught, and these are the meanings that define the reality they refer to, Wittgenstein's represents a simpler and more descriptive approach to philosophical questions. The philosophical treatment of the emotions, for instance, is transformed by this procedure. Instead of examining our own individual emotional states, as eighteenth century Empiricists might have done, the linguistic approach, inspired by Wittgenstein, examines emotion words, the behaviour and circumstances

associated with their application, the ways in which they are taught and so on.

According to the Wittgensteinian view, once we have grasped the idea that the meaning of an emotion word such as “anger” is taught and applied in a public arena, in association with, say, aggravating circumstances and aggressive, agitated behaviour, we know enough to recognise examples of anger and refer to the emotion itself. Any supposition that the concept can be appropriated and secretly used to refer to a private inner feeling of anger, divorced from all manifestations and circumstances associated with its occurrence is a spurious one. It is conceivable that we could give the word our own definition, but the concept has been fashioned in the social arena, so any personal meaning we lend to it will be at variance with its true meaning. Concepts are public property and not the province of the individual.

By adopting this stance, and defending the practices embedded in our everyday language use, linguistic philosophy sought to dispose of many philosophical problems previously considered to be central to a definitive survey of the subject. Its method was to show that the problems arise only as an avoidable consequence of misunderstanding or misrepresenting correct language use. Clarify the concepts involved, and the problems disappear. Problems that bedevil an experience-based philosophy disappear because we cannot create a language of private experience independently of a language that is publicly accessible. The problem of whether my experience of the colour blue is the same as yours when we use the same word is a spurious one, as the meaning of the word “blue” is learned in connection with blue coloured objects. Materialism and its problems are also dismissed. Words for conscious events cannot refer to patterns of neural events, because their meanings are not taught in connection with these. Although complex neural activity admittedly accompanies our thoughts and feelings, the vocabulary of thought and feeling can be fully understood without knowing what is going on inside one’s own or anybody else’s brain. Neural research may bring the two vocabularies towards a convergence, and the tendency to refer to mind and brain interchangeably may become more frequent. But until then the two are quite distinct, and quite different. Two people can have the same thought, for instance, but not the same neural events. Besides, a particularly profound thought may long outlive the brain that produced it.

It is well worth noting here that this social approach to the language of thought and feeling has never resolved a central difficulty that besets any philosophical position that makes close links between consciousness and behaviour. The difficulty is that of recognising the appropriate occasion for the description of **one's own** inner thoughts and feelings. Demonstrating that we know these is not simply a matter of imitating others and mimicking the familiar language forms. That would be pretence. It is a matter of knowing when to use them. And yet how am I going to recognise a personal feeling and apply the correct description to it?

Wittgenstein and his followers never managed to answer this question satisfactorily. There is an old joke about two behaviourists that meet in the street. "You're fine," says one to the other. "How am I?" Wittgenstein, with his social approach to the language of thought and feeling, is vulnerable to this same difficulty. How are we instinctively able to know our own minds without having to examine our own social expressions of these in behaviour?

Linguistic has a dynamic quality that makes what is conceivable dependent upon the activity of a language sharing community. Yet the uncritical pre-eminence given to society and its everyday language amounts to a "socio-lingua-centrism," that traps an entire community within its own preconceptions and orthodoxies. The shift is away from the individual into society but is this enough to achieve that fundamental philosophical objective of separating objective and subjective?

Central to linguistic philosophy is the subordination of the reference of a concept to its meaning. Correct use of the concept word "chair" is sufficient, according to its assumptions, to secure a reference to a chair. If the requirement for objectivity is to be met, however, then the objects we refer to must exist beyond the references we make to them. Whatever its meaning, the word "chair" must be able to refer to something that can be an actual, material chair, existing in reality and the subject of my discussion. Language has evolved to help us meet the challenges and opportunities that reality presents to us. It can describe reality for us and specify the problems we are likely to meet there, but the appearance of language did not bring reality into existence. Meaning and reference are distinct, but linguistic philosophy seems to overlook this. The meaning of a concept can persist even if its objects no longer exist, for instance, and can also develop, even if the objects referred to remain the same. Science provides many examples of both these changes. It has bequeathed

meaningful, explicable but redundant concepts such as “alchemy”, and made discoveries, such as that water is H₂O, and which have become incorporated into the concept of water. Accommodating and chronicling the dynamic relationship between concepts and the reality they define should not present problems to a sound philosophy of language, but it presents a formidable barrier to the linguistic approach.

The difficulty is highlighted when we try and ascertain the simplest of facts. Or contingent truths as philosophers often like to call them. We know the statement “There is a chair in the corner,” to be true if and only if there is in fact a chair in the corner. That is, for a linguistic philosopher, if and only if the statement “There is a chair in the corner,” is true! The problem for a linguistic philosophy is not to sound trivial here and get locked into language whilst trying to say something substantial about a real chair beyond it. Offering evidence for the presence of a chair in the corner, or gesticulating frantically towards it hardly helps us get nearer to a real chair, since we are simply backing up one meaningful action with another. A simple objection but a serious one nonetheless. Our concept of a chair is distinct from any actual chair. Actual chairs may be made of wood or metal and can be sat upon. Not so for any concept of a chair. Yet a linguistic philosophy doesn't seem to have the means to conjure a real chair other than as an instance of the concept of a chair. A chair is nothing more than that which can be referred to by the concept of a chair, or by other concepts, such as being wooden, made of metal, a form of seating and so on. Concept-based theories seem to be guilty of assimilating the reference of a concept with its meaning.

What a linguistic philosophy relies upon, and what it surreptitiously appropriates for its use, is a ready made world of people, objects and artefacts in a reality which, like a cloakroom, offer convenient hooks on which to hang our prefabricated concepts. A linguistic philosophy can sit comfortably here. It is unable to answer the questions of why the world should be divided according to the objects and classifications our language recognises, nor would be able to explain their likely development. That would involve stepping outside our conceptual scheme and its rules in order to examine it, and this is not possible without concepts and rules. Like bewildered children on our first day at a large new school, we arrive at that cloakroom and are introduced to a complex set of rules that govern which hooks we can use, what we can hang on

them and when access to them is permitted. Who makes the rules and for what purposes is something we are never allowed to ask.

Along with other concept-based theories, linguistic philosophy is ethno-centric and presents serious obstacles to those who seeking to understand other cultures. Comparing languages is one way in which we might usefully contrast cultures. If two words are interchangeable there should not be a problem. They translate directly and can be understood as different ways of referring to one and the same reality. In a sense two such words are really the same word, but differently designated. I don't want to quibble, so let's suppose that "chair" and the French "la chaise" are used to refer to broadly the same range of objects, so an English speaker can understand a French speaker using the word without difficulty. Becoming fluent in another such language should not be a problem either, since it is perfectly possible for us to move from one culture to another, and learn the language and customs of the new environment over a period of years.

Yet there are plenty of examples where the translation of concepts poses difficulties. A much-mentioned example is that of the Eskimos who have several words where we have the one word "snow." Common sense has no difficulty with such comparisons. Eskimos recognise many different kinds of snow because their lives are closely bound up with the snow-covered terrain they inhabit for much of the year. Recognising the correct type could be of great importance. Similar sorts of instance crop up frequently in our own culture too. A porcelain specialist, for example will recognise a range of ceramic bodies which most of us will be happy to label simply as clay or pottery.

These are not examples that confound common sense. The European and related Eskimo concepts have a different meaning or significance for the users, but converge upon a given lump of snow. Both have the same reference. But the issue is not so straightforward for a linguistic or concept-based philosophy. There is no direct way of linking up the European "snow" with its Eskimo counterpart. Since the language usage is different there are no linguistic grounds for saying they are talking about precisely the same stuff. The difficulty would be most apparent in an Eskimo language that has no general word for snow. Since each type of snow is significantly different for Eskimos, this is a feasible supposition. They might find the association of such a diversity of substances under a single concept somewhat ridiculous. Without

such a general snow concept the meanings do not overlap sufficiently to establish a common reference. The paradoxical conclusion then follows: so far as winter landscapes are concerned, the European and the Eskimo occupy different realities or worlds.

The snow example is a tired old one, but I make no apologies for reviving it again, because it draws attention to a puzzling central feature of a broad range of contemporary philosophical and social theories. Concept-based theories are often conceived as part of a gesture promoting cross-cultural understanding and tolerance. So it would be ironic if the examination of such a theory were to create the impression of an unbridgeable abyss between cultures that employ different conceptual schemes. Philosophies that promote and even celebrate a rich and diverse range of perspectives are vulnerable if they struggle to accommodate and understand dialogues between them over the very points where they diverge.

Plenty of concept-based philosophers and social theorists do not agree that observations on cultural diversity, such as the example of the Eskimos and their snow words, amount to an objection. For many they represent the important insights upon which their theories are founded. Moreover they would add that we should actively endorse and employ such discoveries to attack theories that claim a monopoly of truth on behalf of one conceptual scheme, such as that deployed by the scientific fraternity.

Observations upon cultural diversity may not amount to an objection. Yet any philosophical theory that both endorses the validity of a conceptual scheme according to its own internal criteria, and which resists any tendency to judge one scheme according to the standards or criteria of another, commits its supporters to a cultural or linguistic relativism. Observations aside, dynamism does have an objection to linguistic philosophy, and all concept-based theories which assert that language or concepts represent the limits of what we can know about reality and what it can contain. There are occasions when we recognise the limitations of language and adapt it to suit our needs more closely.

The dynamic objection runs parallel to one made earlier against theories that nominate appearances as the basis for our perception of objects. Both sets of theories draw attention to a diversity of perspectives upon which our knowledge of reality can be based. But this is to jump the gun and draw illegitimately upon

the knowledge obtained independently through the application of common sense. We cannot locate a diversity of linguistic/cultural perspectives, or even one all on its own, without presuming a common reality beyond them. So many concept-based theorists are happy to indicate and describe a rich array of competing perspectives upon almost any issue, event or situation, sufficient to convince us, they suppose, that there is no one definitive or objective version. But their own perspective disqualifies them from even beginning to do this. Perspectives cannot be produced in a void. Like reflections, reproductions and illusions, they have a derivative existence dependent upon that of some original situation or object from which they diverge or differ. Unless a common object, such as a fall of snow, is presumed as a focus for different perspectives, what reason is there to suppose that the European and Eskimo perceptions are perspectives at all? Only the assumption of a common reference gives them any relationship at all. The common sense assumption that the snow is beyond both perspectives entitles us to start making comparisons, but the concept-based approach is at pains to reject just that assumption.

A possible reply to this objection is that there is a lower level of description for the snow, in terms say of its crystalline or molecular structure, and the snow thus described can be the focus of diverging perspectives. But this concept-relativism is such a pernicious tendency in philosophy that we must take the argument one stage further in an effort to root it out. Will this description at a lower level be just a new perspective, or does it probe a reality beyond or beneath all perspectives? Another new perspective simply invites the same objection, but to deny that it is a perspective, and concede a reality beneath the description, is to concede defeat for a concept-based theory. Perspectives need objects to provide the focus upon which they can converge.

In everyday exchanges, our common sense grasp of reality supplies the people, situations, objects and so on that furnish the raw material for the differences in perspective that we all experience constantly, by virtue of our outlook, position, knowledge and so on. Concept-based theories promise diversity but rapidly collapse into personal isolation. Unable to establish even a single perspective as its starting point, a diversity of outlooks becomes unattainable, and leaves a concept-based theory veering towards solipsism. Concept-based theories offer a choice of conceptual platforms or starting points. Kant limited what we could know to the “forms of sensibility” that constrain the presentation of reality

within the concepts of space, time and number. For the later Wittgenstein it is the range of our everyday language that encompasses the scope of our universe. Marxists define the limits of our vision in narrower terms influenced by economic interests and indicative of a class viewpoint, and narrower still are the psychological and sociological theories of structuralism and post-structuralism.

Even if we cannot escape them, can we at least feel confident in the judgements of our own sub-culture or clique? There is no reason why we should. My outlook on reality has changed radically since I was a child, and just a little since yesterday. Where are we to locate a person's true perspective and the definitive judgements it produces? Concept-based theories not only deny us access to a reality beyond concepts, but also appear unable to define and protect any reality we try to build within them.

None of these difficulties need trouble a dynamic theory that postulates a reality beyond experience as its starting point. Dynamism can readily locate the reality within which different perspectives may be comprehended, and it can be generous about the number and range of concepts that can be applied there. Such liberality is not the sole prerogative of the concept-based theory. Conceptualising reality is just one form of activity characteristic of living creatures found there. It is distinguishable because, amongst other things, it is purposeful and inquisitive. Reality is beyond those conceptual powers because its impetus is independent of their application. Any effort to make reality conform to a set of pre-conceived notions will accordingly meet resistance. Dynamism can succeed where other theories have failed because it gives us our cake as well as the experience of eating it. The dynamic encounter offers us a reality that is both accessible and independent.

Whilst concept-based theories encourage a plurality of viewpoints and are associated with liberalism and freedom, a genuine sense of understanding seems to elude them. They can comprehend conceptual schemes that are different representations of schemes that are the same as their own, and can extend an understanding to other schemes when it amounts to empathy. But an important and perhaps surprising consequence of the position is that it projects a pessimistic message. Such are its flaws that it cannot countenance a third person understanding; it cannot recognise one that is both genuine and yet detached. Either our understanding

has to be engaged and empathetic, or it is no understanding at all. The theorists seem quite happy with this conclusion, and endorse views that often command a popular following. That men will never understand women, or that a white person cannot understand what it is like to be black, and so on. Misguided theories that foster mistrust and division.

The discussion has moved some way from Wittgenstein's later philosophy into an appraisal of all concept-based theories with which linguistic philosophy has much in common. Central to Wittgenstein's thinking is the belief that an individual cannot supply the objectivity necessary for language to refer to reality consistently and in accordance with rules. This is true, but unfortunately two individuals don't supply the necessary objectivity either; nor indeed can an entire society, happily working within a language that is entirely of their own construction. If you want objectivity, then no matter how meaningfully and artfully you weave your discourse, you must have objects too. Concept-based theories are confident that concept applications are sufficient on their own, but a strict examination of their assumptions swiftly leads to the conclusion that no one is left able to say anything meaningful at all.

All that Wittgenstein and other concept theories can show us of reality is something of a sophisticated mime show. Instead of the chair in the corner we are treated to a "chair-in-the-corner" scenario that acts out the presence of the chair. It is discussed, indicated and compared in mime, whilst characters enter, walk around it, trip over or seat themselves upon it. They might scrutinise it, and adjust its position slightly to show it to best effect. There is no chair there of course, but such is the quality of the performance, there might just as well be one. You can almost see and touch it yourself. And yet, no matter how elaborate the charade, the concept-based enactment of a chair never conjures up a real chair. The qualities of the chair can never be more than those the participating players extend to it. It is without substance.

In defence of Wittgenstein it could be argued that he proposed nothing approaching a comprehensive concept-based theory for the relationship between experiences and reality. It may be fairer to suggest that he was more concerned with promoting everyday language as the arbiter of philosophical problems, and language acquisition as the key to solving them. That he was certainly preoccupied with these concerns is certain, and he offers us

important insights here. Thanks to him, for instance, we are less tempted to feel that any supposed philosophical problem, however phrased, must be confronted head-on and a solution sought. We are much more cautious about what makes a genuine philosophical problem, and more inclined to look for conceptual misapprehensions or confusions that can mislead us into creating imaginary riddles. “What does the mind look like?” might count as one such dubious problem for the Wittgensteinian. To suppose it to be the sort of thing that is visible is to misconstrue the concept of the mind and the way in which it is used. A much commoner strategy nowadays is to remove such problems from the philosopher’s in-tray, rather than attempt solutions to them.

Before returning to Wittgenstein, I wish to examine concepts in more detail. Concepts are needed to make reality accessible to us and no philosophical theory will make much headway if it overlooks their role completely. To be in possession of all of one’s faculties and in the presence of a chair is not enough to give you access to it. It is necessary to apply your faculties actively to your surroundings, and concepts are necessary in order to achieve this. I have already suggested that concepts are the exclusive prerogative of conscious beings, and represent in a general fashion the scope and direction of an interest in reality. Thus the concept of a chair doesn’t refer to one specific chair, or to a set of identical chairs, but to a diversity of actual and possible pieces of furniture designed or adapted to provide a particular form of seating. This makes concepts different from proper nouns or definite descriptions that refer uniquely, e.g. “Shakespeare” or “The author of ‘Macbeth’.”

One reason why we have developed a language of concepts is to reduce our dependence upon proper nouns and other uniquely referring expressions. With a vocabulary of concepts, there is no need to characterise each separate thing with its own exclusive name or proper noun. Concepts can be combined to generate both a great number of unique references and shades of meaning, whilst working within a manageable vocabulary. Similarly you can work more effectively in a workshop stocked with a range of versatile tools than in one with a separate tool or template corresponding to every conceivable job you might be asked to do. Finding the appropriate tool and remembering its application may prove to be just too difficult.

Another advantage for a language containing the means to refer both generally and specifically is that it enables us to convey discoveries and new ideas without having to extend the vocabulary in order to include them. It is easier to describe an unusual butterfly, for instance, in general terms of its size, colour and markings so that someone might help us identify it. If we don't know its name we are stuck without a description.

The generality that marks out concepts lends a new quality to the things we can say about them. Sentences about concepts can state "essential" truths because they refer to every possible instance of the concept. Being a piece of furniture and adapted or designed to accommodate individual seating requirements is something that can be said of all chairs. Describing the scope of a concept is different from stating facts about the objects it refers to. So we can say things about concepts that the observation and investigation of their objects will not directly confirm. It is no coincidental matter of observed fact if you notice that one particular chair furnishes us with a convenient form of seating. Unless so designed, and intended as such, it ain't no chair at all.

Also related to this generality is the flexibility of the demands they place upon reality. Hunger for example is an interest directed at a range of suitable foodstuffs, and only exceptionally fixes upon a unique portion of a particular dish. As a rule our earliest demands upon reality assume a generalised form, and persist as such throughout our lives, even when we are at our most demanding and are threatening temper tantrums. Love and jealousy are examples of emotions that can mark out their objects uniquely, but in the main a range of options can satisfy even a discriminating and fastidious interest.

I have made two suggestions concerning the process of concept formation and development. One is that it often begins with the acknowledgment of needs or interests in a generalised form. The other is that the recognition of individual instances or objects usually proceeds from this starting point. Both these suggestions run counter to a traditional understanding here. Typically the traditional model for concept formation begins with the examination of individual examples of a type, and tries to derive general ideas from them. Thus we might derive ideas about individual seating arrangements from the consideration of a number of individual chairs. This is perfectly possible. Sometimes this is how we analyse and refine some of the concepts already in our

possession. Two antique dealers might do just this in discussing when a back stool becomes a chair, for instance. But the simpler concepts are not normally acquired in this way. Besides, this traditional model poses problems. Firstly the selection of individual examples of chairs for scrutiny already requires possession of the concept in order to be effected. Concept possession is already presumed in the identification of most individual objects. Secondly, any conclusions we reach will not state essential truths, but simpler generalisations that may or may not extend to further examples.

In order to proceed from the general to the particular we need to narrow down the reference of our concepts to the point where they achieve a unique reference. A conjunction of concepts usually suffices. "The upholstered armchair with the tapestry pattern" succeeds in uniquely referring to a chair in my drawing room, for instance, although another chair elsewhere in the house also fits the description. Some uniquely referring expressions make only a provisional reference. Were the two upholstered armchairs to be switched, then "The upholstered armchair with the tapestry pattern" now refers to a different chair. "The chair I have just sat upon" makes a permanent reference to the one chair however, whatever becomes of it. The event specifies a point in time and space and so becomes a part of the chair's unique history. Proper nouns also make a unique references, and in this second permanent sense, because the person, place or whatever they refer to uniquely occupy positions in space and time.

Proper nouns or names are sometimes seen as problematic because they don't possess meanings in the conventional sense. Dictionaries omit the vast majority of them, and there is no flexibility in their application. Yet they are not meaningless, for the sentences containing them are not gibberish. Any meaning they do possess might be vicarious, and derived from uniquely referring descriptions. Thus "Dickens" perhaps owes its meaning to descriptions such as "The author of Oliver Twist." But the problem here is that the proper name and the description, although referring to the same individual, do not possess the same meaning. Were they to do so then all descriptions that refer uniquely to Dickens would have the same meaning, when each could state quite different facts about him. So how can both name and description refer to the same individual when they have different meanings, and how can a name refer at all unless it is linked closely to some description or other?

We can avoid this problem however, so long as we can retain a distinction between the meanings and the references of names or descriptions. Different descriptions of Dickens have different meanings because we can infer different facts from them and because their constituent words have different applications in other contexts. Proper nouns are neither descriptions, nor proxy descriptions for the most part. They cannot be so broken down. Yet both name and description suffice to make a reference to one and the same author. How is this so? It is not because they possess the same meaning, but because the name e.g. "Dickens" has a contingent association with a large number of facts that are uniquely true of him. It is a fact that Dickens wrote "Oliver Twist" and so a fact that both name and description refer to the same person. Some facts are more closely associated than others with the identity of a person or place, so that if we question Dickens' birth date or birthplace, it becomes doubtful whether we are talking about Dickens at all, or about some other person. So, although it is erroneous to identify the meaning of "Dickens" with just one fact about him, there is certainly scope to make an association between the name and a number of related core facts about his life. This would lend a meaning to the name "Dickens" after all, and undermine the contingency of the association between name and description. But it would be a different sort of meaning from that found in a dictionary. It would specify his identity with respect to a linked series of true descriptions or facts about him. Specifying the identity of a person, or place or things with reference to a number of facts is different from defining a concept and its relationship with other concepts. The first deals with the references of names and descriptions and the second with the meanings of the words being used.

Unfortunately the picture becomes a little more complicated because some names, such as nicknames, or place names are descriptions. "Stow on the Wold" started out as a description, but there was probably a time when it was simultaneously a name as well. So long as its use conveyed information then it continued to serve as a description. The dependence of names upon descriptions is highlighted when the reference of a name is in doubt. It is impossible to settle the issue of whether Dickens was "Boz" or not until descriptions of facts can be attributed to both of them and compared.

The reason for so much detail here is to show that dynamism can make a distinction between meaning and reference so that the difference between proper nouns and common nouns in our language can be more properly understood. There is a tendency for concept-based theories to get so wrapped up in concepts that they cannot appreciate the contingency of the relationship between a name and its object. Similarly object-based theories such as empiricism and materialism are inclined to see only contingent relationships between objects and events, and have difficulty assimilating conceptual ties and the essential truths they contain.

The generality that is a feature of concepts and the flexibility of their application creates the scope for describing their objects in terms of their properties. Properties are one way we can characterise the variation in objects that our concepts will tolerate, and consequently provide the means of comparing them. As we have seen, this variation is often due to the changing conditions under which objects are viewed. How we divide up reality between properties, processes and objects will depend in part upon the sort of society we live in and the way of life that our environment sustains. European languages, for instance, are more inclined than some native to North America to favour nouns to itemise reality. So we are more inclined to conceive our surroundings as inventories of objects. Our vocabularies reflect this and contain proportionately more object and fewer property or process words. This may be due in part to a way of life that has stressed the importance of individual property rights, and where communal living is less important than in earlier centuries.

A dynamic theory subordinates properties to objects and the different guises in which they can appear. They don't exist alongside objects and are not the source of our knowledge of them. So what of temperature or colour and other properties? How is any object conceivable apart from its properties and why are these properties not objects?

As they are subordinate to objects, properties cannot exist except as the properties of objects. Concepts define classes of objects and, where not divided into subclasses, properties can characterise the scope for variations in the objects so classified. The concept of food, for instance, demarcates objects that are edible, and these may be divided into subclasses of foodstuffs, such as cereals, vegetables, meat and so on. Food may be adulterated or putrefy, but these represent subsequent influences

on its basic edible state. Within each class or subclass there is still going to be an enormous variation in the foods found there, and properties such as fresh, organic, raw, or spiced will help specify them. As all foodstuffs are edible, does this not amount to characterising them all as possessing the same property of edibility? Yes it does, but this does not have the effect of subordinating objects to their properties. The effect is simply to give a property word the role of a noun. It is just a way of re-christening them all as “comestibles” or “edibles”.

It is quite common to label some things by property words. The “blues” are an order of butterfly species, and “reds” are a subset of balls in snooker. “Blue” is a property word for all coloured objects, but where the property is used to define a set of objects, it becomes a label or noun. Because commonly used property words are here being borrowed to label objects, it is important that the context is always clear when using them. Reds can also refer to potatoes, chickens or football teams, for example, and confusion may need to be avoided.

If a property must belong to a class of objects then it no longer signifies variation within an object, and now signifies a part of the concept that defines the object. Being edible is not strictly speaking a property of food, but represents an essential part of the definition of any foodstuff. This doesn't mean that edibility isn't a property at all. Indeed it is a useful property when conditions permit its application to other objects. Only some mushrooms are edible, for instance, and precautions are necessary before some shellfish can be eaten. “Edibility” can signify a property, but only in classes objects that may or may not possess it.

A frequently asked question in philosophy dwells on an object and what it would be like when stripped of its properties. Is it still an object, an empty framework and receptacle perhaps, or nothing at all? The question is usually posed by philosophers, such as Empiricists, who are opposed to the concept-based tradition, and reveals a distrust of the essences that too intimate a relationship between concept and reality can beget. Dynamism can suggest its own answer here. What remains specifies an object corresponding to the concept that defines it. Strip the object of its concept too and nothing at all is left. Edibility is a part of the definition of food and, as part of the concept, it helps to specify its instances or objects. Being an inextricable part of its objects, it remains after their properties have been removed. Dynamism

makes this possible because, unlike Empiricism, it denies that objects are assembled out of their properties. Just as it denies that perceptions are constructed out of appearances. Concepts certainly represent essences, but essences are not objects. The dynamic suggestion is that both the concept of an object and the properties of the object make contrast or mutual opposition the hallmark of their relationship.

So dynamism resists a nominalist position or Platonic tendency that believes concept words to correspond with objects of a particular type. The common “essence” that foodstuffs share, that makes them all edible, is not some mysterious extra substance that suffuses all its instances or objects. The foundation for our conceptual schemes is provided by conscious beings that show an inquisitive interest in reality. That the concept of food unites seemingly diverse life forms is evidence of the consistency and perseverance of our endeavours to secure a source of nourishment. Properties emerge as a subsidiary means of characterising the complexity of the structures we build in order to understand and become effective within reality. Constructions out of properties alone have no foundation.

Concepts may be more or less precise in their meaning, and are rarely so meticulously formulated to cover every contingency. So we might well dispute where the boundary between orange and red occurs on the spectrum, or whether a irreparably broken chair is still a chair. How far we go to pre-empt such disputes is really a matter of decision, and consideration must be given to what is practical. Philosophers push at the limits more than most, but there comes a point for all of us when our patience with quibbling distinctions becomes exhausted. The ambiguity of many concepts in the face of a reality that is often very far from ambiguous is a problem area for concept-based philosophers. Even if it is unresolved whether the rare postage stamp is a shade of red or vermilion, for example, the stamp itself does not have an indeterminate colour. For a concept-based theory, indeterminacy itself will have to be conceivable in terms of other concept applications. Indeterminacy will not pose a problem for a dynamic theory of course, because a concept is distinct from its objects. So we have no need to worry that concepts often display divergent qualities from the objects they are designed to locate. It can look upon concepts as tools that give access to reality, but tools that may be crudely fashioned to the purpose, lacking the sharpness to penetrate reality and retrieve their objects cleanly. If necessary

they can be improved and refined, and better adapted to the purposes for which they were enlisted.

The distinction between concept and reality gives us two forms of truth often referred to as “necessary” and “contingent.” I have already referred to the “essential” truths that result from a description of concepts, and these are examples of necessary truths. Contingent truths, on the other hand are those we state about reality, and typically describe facts. Thus it is necessarily true that a chair is a piece of furniture designed or produced to provide individual seating with back support, but only contingently true that any item of furniture we examine actually possesses these features. Contingent truths may or may not be true, and investigation or verification may be necessary to ascertain their truth. Concepts urge demands which reality must meet if their application is to be successful. Not that there is any requirement upon reality to conform to the demands of any concept. Our endeavours may strive to make it so, but irrespective of our success, a concept will tend simply either to apply or not apply to reality.

Conceptual change is something that a dynamic theory can readily comprehend. Linked to social developments, it is most likely to occur in the political domain, or where fashion and taste predominate. A concept such as “poverty” seems to have changed out of all recognition. Today it typically and controversially represents conditions in the West that would have seemed luxurious to earlier generations, and yet it remains the same evolving concept. Its progress can be plotted against the changing material circumstances and expectations that a developing economy generates. The unbroken continuity of its development partly explains its persistence as one concept, but then as now it represents a preoccupation with a minimum and tolerable level of material and spiritual well being throughout society. Without this constant object of concern it is likely that we would accept that we have abandoned one concept and embraced another bearing the same name. I will not probe deeper into the concept of a concept at the present time!

Loosely organised concepts are also more easily understood from a dynamic perspective. Wittgenstein attempted to undermine the accustomed belief in a single and unified essence that sustains each concept with a challenge to find one for the concept of a game. It is certainly difficult to isolate a number of features or

conditions that are both necessary and sufficient for an activity to qualify as such. Recreational, rule-governed, and competitive are candidates for such conditions, but do not provide a definition of the right breadth. Many games are no longer recreational for the professionals who play them, whilst too many activities other than games are rule-governed. Indeed relaxing the normal rules for some activities makes a game of some serious pursuits. Children often parody the adult world in their play for instance. Similarly, too many activities other than games are competitive, when some games are not, and others can be enjoyed on their own and just for fun.

The informality of our concept structures need not trouble a dynamic theory since it is not looking for the meaning of a concept in a single integrated reference. The problem has been one mainly for Empiricist and other experience-based theories which require a common noun to stand for a single set of commonly held properties in order to lend it a single meaning.

Nonetheless there are other approaches to the concept that can help us understand its cohesiveness. Each is after all a single concept, and needs to be understood as such. One is to recognise that conditions can combine in a variety of interlocking ways to bind a concept together. There might be five possible conditions that are pertinent to a concept application, with no one either necessary or sufficient on its own. Any three might combine, or two might suffice, so long as one particular one is combined with one of two others, for example. Listing the combinations, and the circumstances under which they combine might be a complex affair, but it will do the job. A good place to look for examples would be in an area governed by regulations, where the conditions that attach to the granting of allowances or grants create a diversity of routes by which an application achieves the status of eligibility.

Another approach to informal concept structures is to seek a common source for the diverse activities associated there. Games possess a common origin in rule-governed contests and demonstrations of skills. These were a rehearsal, practice or preparation for their more earnest deployment on the battlefield and elsewhere, so a sense of relaxation and the recreational is built into the concept of a game. Hence the interest for children, for whom games enjoy adult protection, and are a preparation for the responsibilities of the adult world. Some contests such as

dancing require adjudication, so perhaps they lack the directly combative element that games possess, whilst games of pure chance might only qualify so long as their participants believed luck to be an attribute amounting to a skill. As games, along with their concept, have evolved so branches have sprouted, such as the emergence of professional sport. The development of diverse games, such as patience and war games can therefore both be traced from a shared source. Yet, even in a game of patience an element of skill remains and players can experience a competitive urge to improve their performance. Wittgenstein made a telling philosophical point in raising this example, but it seems possible that with some ingenuity the essence of a game might be teased out by a single definition.

The dynamic approach has been suspicious of theories that offer explanations for complex phenomena by analysing them into ultimately simple parts. It has questioned the Empiricist programme of analysing objects into combinations of basic properties, and rejected the “atomic” tendency to reduce propositions to basic terms that refer to elementary objects. It will now go further in suggesting that words are not the building blocks of meaning out of which we construct sentences. Instead we must look to the sentence to provide the basic unit of meaning. The main purpose of language is to effect communication, with description just one of the forms it may assume. Imperatives, interrogatives and exclamations are other forms, and it is often possible, depending upon the intonation that we use, to apply different forms to the same sequence of words. “There is a chair in the corner.” can be spoken to make a statement, ask a question or issue a warning, and punctuation marks can make these intentions clear when the words are written. Uttering words such as “chair” simply to refer to chairs serves no useful purpose until harnessed to the purposeful action that a sentence, or implied sentence provides.

The dynamic contention is that our primary objective in using language is to effect an action, such as conveying information through description. It owes something to Wittgenstein’s central insight that language derives its meaning from the diversity of its uses within a far broader context of meaningful actions throughout society. Language probably started out as meaningful grunts. But our first forays into language also confirm this view. The toddler who cries “Doggy!” is doing more than simply referring to a dog. He is trying to attract attention and show he has seen something

he can identify. Sometimes even a simple grimace or grunt suffices to make a statement. Where language differs it is in the complexity of the conventions that govern its formulation and use.

A language consisting entirely of elementary symbols, each one representing a different sentence, is perfectly conceivable. But it would be a very different language from our own. For example, although "Chair!" might serve to indicate a chair, a new utterance would be needed to indicate that there is a chair in the corner, and another to say that it is a chair, in the corner and upholstered in green damask. Such a language would need so many symbols it would become too cumbersome to learn and use. Words are necessary to facilitate language use so that, with a vocabulary of just a few thousand, we can easily construct millions of sentences tailored to any imaginable situation or purpose. They exist to serve the needs of sentence construction, and the meaning of one word is more closely associated with the variety of contexts in which it is called upon than with the role it plays in just one sentence. Similarly we would not expect all the qualities of one brick to be fully exploited by the position it occupies in a single building.

Although a dynamic theory recognises a close association between meaning and use, it opposes the Wittgensteinian view. Dynamism maintains that the use of a word is a consequence of its meaning rather than its source. The meaning of a word can be established independently of its use because it can be identified in a situation and in the objectives pursued there. Meaning emerges as a consequence of the agenda we impose upon reality.

Recognising the close connection between meaning and purpose is necessary for understanding language and using it effectively. This might seem like a quibble, but the implications are far reaching. The error is rather like that of assimilating a tool with its uses. There is no harm in identifying a tool with the range of tasks it can perform, but if our understanding extends no further, it is too narrow. If we want to know how well a tool is designed or adapted to perform those tasks, then we need to know the materials of which it is made, the design and the method of its construction. These qualities determine the range and suitability of the tasks it is fitted to serve, and are crucial to the appraisal and development of any effective range of implements. The consequence of too narrow an assimilation is of course a commitment to a concept-based theory in which reality is confined to the limits of language use, and the other meaningful social activities with which it is

associated. It makes us too uncritical of the cultural and linguistic edifice that we have constructed.

Dynamism in contrast retains an anchor in a reality in which social interaction is but one form of activity, however important that may be. It therefore remains free to offer insights into the conditions under which that interaction operates, and of the conscious life forms that sustain it. The conditions that give language its meaning and allow concepts their reference. So my hope has been in this chapter to sustain the focus on concepts in order to show how they occupy such a pivotal position in our lives. On the one hand they are closely bound up with our intentions and outlook on reality, and yet, on the other they reach directly into reality itself. Understanding further this relationship of concepts with their objects brings us to an examination of truth to which I will now turn.

Summary of Conclusions: Linguistic philosophy implies too close an association between the meaning and reference of a concept. It depends excessively upon the ready-made distinctions and classifications within a language, and lacks the means of explaining how they have arrived there. Linguistic and other concept-based philosophy too emphatically draws attention to different conceptual systems and the diverse perspectives they represent. The distinctive cultural outlook each embodies is misleadingly used to cast doubt on the feasibility of seeking a common focus for them in reality.

Dynamism locates meaning in social interaction and the agendas that conscious beings pursue. It reverses the Wittgensteinian position and suggests that the use of a word is a consequence of its meaning rather than its source. So conceived language use can be understood as taking place within reality rather than limiting and controlling our access to it.

Linguistic and concept based theories offer no account of a shared reality and hold no prospect for a mutual understanding of different perspectives. Dynamism asserts that a common reference is necessary in order for diverse perspectives to be distinguishable and shows how this may be achieved.

For dynamism, concepts are our means of gaining access to reality. They are the exclusive prerogative of conscious beings, and represent in a general fashion the scope and direction of an interest in reality. Related to this generality is the flexibility of the demands we place there.

Properties are one means of characterising the variation in objects that the flexibility of concepts will tolerate. Objects are more fundamental than properties and cannot be exclusively built from them. The manner in which we divide up reality between properties, processes and objects

depends in part upon the sort of society we live in and the way of life that our environment sustains.

Language generates a great number of both unique references and shades of meaning, whilst working within a manageable vocabulary. Combining concepts and locating them in space and time is one means of narrowing generalisations to secure a unique reference.

A proper noun also secures a unique reference. It does not have the same meaning as a uniquely referring expression that refers to the same thing. The same reference is the result of contingent associations between the two.

Sentences about concepts can state “essential” truths because they refer to every possible instance of the concept. An object stripped to its essential properties assumes a generality corresponding to the concept that defines it. This is its nominal essence. The separation of meaning and essence on the one side, and the reference or particular on the other, allows dynamism to embrace or tolerate change, ambiguity or vagueness in concepts without requiring the same of their objects. The sentence is the basic unit or building block of meaning and is principally used to effect an action. Words exist to expedite language use, but depend upon the sentence to lend them meaning.

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