FORMALISTS AND INFORMALISTS: SOME METHODOLOGICAL TURNINGS

Kai Nielsen
The University of Calgary

I

There is, as by now is well known, a very strong reaction among the third generation of analytical philosophers against ordinary language philosophy. The reaction has been effective, for, justified or not, ordinary language philosophy has long been *passé*. To these third generation philosophers it connotes amateurishness, a flippant attitude toward logic and, more generally, a disdainful attitude toward formalism. Moreover, it is not only formalism that receives this easy dismissal but the history of philosophical thought and the central problems of philosophy as well. There is sometimes something in all these charges but they do not hold for the best of its practitioners. Informed reflection on the work of J.L. Austin makes this evident.

All this posturing aside, what issues of substance, if any, stand between ordinary language philosophers and the proponents of a more formal way of doing philosophy? Both are suspicious of talking about meanings and for much the same reasons. But "exact philosophers" (to give them a name) think that there is little mileage in Wittgenstein's slogan "Don't look for the meaning, look for the use."[1]

---

[1] "Exact philosophers" can, depending on whom you are talking

They are prepared to grant that our natural languages are adequate means of communication and many would also grant Austin's point that these languages are more subtle and indeed a vastly superior means of communication and human understanding than any "ideal language" a philosopher or group of philosophers might dream up. Moreover, gaining an initial understanding of almost anything at all, we start from ordinary language and appeal to ordinary language in most domains as our final test in any dispute over what it makes sense to say.

This does not mean that there is any "ultimately final test" (whatever that means) of what it makes sense to say but that in any particular dispute this would be our last ditch appeal. That native speakers say we would not say "Procrastination drinks melancholy" but we could say (truly or falsely) that "Frank drinks martinis" settles it. There is no getting back of this and saying that the native speaker is mistaken here about what it makes sense to say. "The final test" for intelligibility, some very theoretical and technical utterances aside, is what native speakers would say. If some metaphysician maintains that time is unreal, he is refuted by the simple fact that "Frank put on his socks before he put on his shoes" is not a deviation from a linguistic regularity (has a use in the language) *and* by the further fact that it is true that Frank puts on his socks before he puts on his shoes.

"While that Moorean stuff is undeniable," the 'exact philosopher' might respond, "it gives no *explanation* at all of why or how 'Procrastination drinks melancholy' is unintelligible and 'Frank drinks martinis' is not." To answer, as the ordinary language philosophers would, that the

to, be either a laudatory term (after all there is a society for exact philosophy) or a pejorative term suggesting hubristic illusion. The reader can choose her own emotive force. There is little point in speculating on mine.

latter has a use in the language and the former does not is not adequate for it does not explain either *how* or *why* one has a use and the other does not. It is just that very thing, the claim goes, that the philosopher wants to understand and here he needs to know something about the syntax and semantics of natural languages, where logic may sometimes at least be of help in modelling or depicting that syntax or semantics as in (to take a paradigm case) Russell's theory of descriptions.

Ordinary language philosophers will be suspicious of the utility of that and will believe that more informal techniques such as those deployed by Austin or Wittgenstein are likely to yield a more perspicuous representation. But there is no good reason on either side to be dogmatic here. As long as the logician is no longer claiming, as Russell and Carnap once did, and as perhaps even the Wittgenstein of *The Tractatus* did, that logical analysis can reveal the real logical form of language underlying our natural languages, then it is perfectly possible that for some bits of natural language the utilization of a given logic might help us understand how it is that a given philosophically puzzling sentence makes sense or fails to make sense. Things get recast, as in Russell's theory of descriptions, and sometimes that recasting might be insightful: it might, that is, break puzzlement as to how that sentence can make sense.

Philosophical puzzlement often takes the form: "This must make sense for it has a use in the language, e.g. 'England declared war', but it can't because of thus and so." Formal and informal techniques will compete to explain how and/or why, that, thus and so to the contrary notwithstanding, it does indeed make sense. The test will be to find out which will most perspicuously represent what a given term or sentence means and how it is that what seems to make it problematic does not in fact do so. We cannot say ahead of time which procedure will yield the

best explanation. They both must try out their wares and see which account has the greatest explanatory power and best relieves philosophical perplexity. (It is to be hoped that the account that has the greatest explanatory power will also best relieve philosophical perplexity. But there is no logical necessity that this be so.) It may be (*pace* Wittgenstein) that where the perplexities are around mathematics, logic itself and around certain areas of physics, formal techniques will work best and where the perplexities are around ethics, aesthetics, political and social philosophy, informal techniques will work best. That, if indeed it is so, would surely not be surprising. The point is, given the acceptance of the above constraints, it is a mistake to make any *a priori* or general claims about which will work best. We will just have to wait and see. So the usual partisanship, which is strong on both sides, should be set aside.

II

So far so good. But there is perhaps a deeper dispute about the very thing that philosophers should be doing and about what philosophy should be that divides "exact philosophers" from "ordinary language philosophers." As stated above, the dispute was over which account could best explain *how* it is that certain philosophically puzzling sentences that we know make sense, knowing how to use the language, make sense. We know how to use those sentences but we do not understand how it is that they could make sense. But there are some philosophers, initially influenced by ordinary language philosophy and by Wittgenstein, who have come to take a different direction. They ask how should philosophers proceed, once it becomes plain —as the cutting edge of "exact philosophers" as well as ordinary language philosophers agree—,

74

that whether a word or a sentence has a use in the language settles whether an expression or sentence is meaningful (intelligible)? As some breakaway former ordinary language philosophers argue, once this is clearly seen and carefully reflected on philosophy should take a different direction. With use as a litmus paper test of what it makes sense to say, some philosophers, starting with ordinary language, will no longer concern themselves with trying to understand *how* words or sentences make sense or why they make sense. Knowing that they do, they will turn to trying to evaluate the truth-claims made by such sentences or their non-semantical import. They may go on to make certain truth-claims themselves using the kind of concepts that once generated philosophical perplexity. Old questions, for example, about the State are no longer asked, and new (as far as analytic philosophy is concerned), quite distinct ones, are. Knowing that "England declared war" makes sense (has a use) while "England had a baby" does not, we no longer ask what kind of peculiar substance the substantive "England" or "State" stands for (denotes) but instead ask questions like what is state power? what forms does it take? what is the relation between power and authority? when (if ever) is state authority legitimate? when is revolution against a state justified? how in societies such as ours has the state changed?, and what are the moral implications of that change? It is enough for philosophers who pursue those questions, without *conceptual* cramps, that there is State-talk which is not linguistically deviant, which has a use in the language. That tells us that such talk is intelligible. Given the above sort of questions, which are at least as traditionally philosophical and are far more normatively significant than the questions of linguistic philosophy, there is no need to ask how our talk makes sense: which syntatic or semantic structures are at play? Knowing that such talk makes sense, one asks questions like those

asked above, questions the answering of which (or so at least it seems) requires a different set of skills, a different repertoire and method of approach than the ones utilized by either "the exact philosopher" or the "ordinary language philosopher."

III

Let me, trying to inch this forward a little, turn to a discussion (perhaps better called a metadiscussion) of justice *à la* John Rawls. Rawls does not give an analysis or elucidation of the concept of justice in either the manner of "ordinary language philosophers" or "exact philosophers." He assumes that we, at least as people who stand where we stand historically, have a concept of justice and that it is at least relatively unproblematic. He further assumes that we have different conceptions of our common concept of justice: our concept, he assumes, is a common concept and doesn't dissolve into our different conceptions.

What he is interested in is which of these conceptions yields the most reasonable, the best justified, principles of political justice (principles for the basic structure of societies) for our liberal societies under conditions of moderate scarcity and limited altruism. His contractarian method and his method of appealing to considered judgments in wide reflective equilibrium are his methods for trying to establish this. They are not the methods of linguistic analysis, conceptual analysis or logical analysis of either ordinary language philosophy or of "exact philosophy." Neither examination of language (formal or informal) nor logic play much of a role in Rawl's work.[2] Indeed, he is not engaging

[2] The reception in France, though not in Québec, of the French translation of *A Theory of Justice* is instructive. Although a considerable fanfare (in France) followed its publication, it was (generally speaking) not favorably received. The complaint was that there was

76

in conceptual analysis at all. (This, of course, is not to say that his account is illogical or not soundly argued.)

Suppose it is challenged that there really is such a common concept of justice. Suppose further that it is denied that there is anything in our complex democratic societies that is our concept of justice. Rawls does not bother with this challenge and I think (*pace* R.M. Hare) rightly so. But if he, or someone on his behalf, were to take up the challenge, he could rely on Wittgensteinian techniques to show in our language-games what the use of "justice" is. If there is a stable use there then they would have shown that there is something that is our concept of justice. If that is so, then there is something that Rawls could take as an assumption and proceed as he does without any concern for such meta-ethical issues. If not, then moral and social theory, at least for arguments about justice, would have to proceed rather differently. Concerning such an issue ordinary language philosophy (informal linguistic philosophy) would be quite useful while formal semantical and syntactical analyses would not. The latter would not because it would have to start by assuming, to do its own work, that determination of whether there was an established use of "justice" would show us whether or not we had a concept of justice rather than just different conceptions of justice and, if so (staying on the level of description) what that concept is. If there is a concept there, then "exact philosophy" could offer a characterization of its syntax and

no conceptual anlysis in it and no deep historically informed probing of the foundations of moral and political philosophy. Instead it was deemed to be, on the one hand, too vague (Hare's old complaint of the original) and, as well, on the other hand, too practical, too policy oriented, in short, far too American. This contrasts interestingly with the reaction of not a few law professors in North America who, when they hear the name Rawls, try to escape, for they are convinced that the discussion will be far too arcane and so far away from political and legal realities as to be pointless.

semantics and it could do that for whatever conceptions of justice there are as well.[3] But whether we have a concept of justice is determined by whether "justice," in the various language-games in which it occurs, has a stable use. But whether or not this is so is not determined by the procedures of the 'exact philosophy'. Rather 'exact philosophy' wants to explain *how* the concept makes sense if indeed there is such a concept. It cannot settle the issue of whether there is an intelligible concept there.

Rawls, if he were to consider the challenge that there is no concept of justice, would need an answer to the question of whether 'justice' has a stable use, rather than an answer to the exact philosopher's questions, and that answer would be given by something like Wittgensteinian techniques. "Use", which may be too crude a conception to answer the questions "exact philosophers" want to ask, is perfectly in place in this context. We need, in facing such a challenge to Rawls, to give good arguments for believing we have a concept of justice. Once that is established then one can get on with trying to ascertain which principles of justice and which related social practices are best for a liberal society under conditions of moderate scarcity and limited altruism. Here neither logical techniques nor linguistic techniques are of much use. Philosophy so pursued takes a different direction and requires different methods for its successful pursuance.

IV

A kind of historical note might be made here. Wittgenstein, particularly in *Philosophical Investigations*, stressed that he was not giving explanations but *descriptions* and that these descriptions came to an assembling of reminders

---

[3] After all description, even if inescapably interpretive, is the first word. Any explanation depends on that.

for a particular purpose. "Exact philosophers" are not content with description but seek an explanation of *how* it is that meaningful words and sentences are meaningful. What is the syntax and semantics of our words and sentences? This clearly is a scientific job and if that is what philosophy comes to then it would either be an empirical or formal science, or a mixture of both. This, if its scientific aims were just those, would radically constrain philosophy. It would radically change what is has been historically and indeed still is with most philosophers. Philosophy would become something quite different from what it has traditionally been and its scope would be extensively cut back. But such a scientific enterprise is not unintelligible. Whatever value it has (if any) would find its proof in the carrying out of such a research program. (We could also, of course, distinctly ask pragmatic questions about the point of such an enterprise and the interests it answers to.)

Wittgenstein's descriptions, as descriptions, while (in intent at least) perfectly empirical —or else they would not be descriptions— are used for radically different purposes. They are used to break philosophical perplexity, to show (try to show) how a disguised bit of nonsense really is nonsense or how what seems an utter mystery, giving rise to weighty but utterly baffling questions, is rather either a pseudo-question or a question that can be answered once we come to see how a perplexing bit of language (e.g. State-talk) is actually used when the engine isn't idling in the language-games in which it has its home.

This can be of value, as in Rawls' case discussed above, in clearing away unfruitful inquiries which stand in the way of doing more substantive work. In Rawls' example, we can get on with arguing about what principles of political justice are justified and what is the best method of their justification rather than worrying about what is the correct analysis of "justice" and whether, after all, there really is a

concept of justice. Wittgensteinian description can answer the latter question and with such an answer we can, for Rawls' substantive purposes, including substantively normative purposes, perfectly legitimately set aside the former question. (This doesn't mean it can't be answered, but it does mean we do not have to bother answering it.) But for the latter question it is enough to assemble reminders for a particular purpose to show us what the use of "justice" is when the engine isn't idling. It is also important to see that no *theory* is required for this. Indeed theory is likely only to get in the way. This gives us, in action so to speak, an understanding of why Wittgenstein repeatedly denied he was offering a theory and the point of such a denial.[4]

---

[4] I thank Jocelyne Couture for provoking this note, but I do not burden her with my formulations or the twistings.

RESUMEN

Hasta el momento suele haber un consenso bastante significativo acerca de que para determinar lo que tiene sentido decir no hay forma de remitirse a lo que los hablantes nativos dicen. Esto se determina por el uso y el uso de una expresión se establece a su vez por su lugar en las prácticas lingüísticas donde ocurre. Lo que los formalistas e informalistas sí pueden discutir legítimamente es cómo explicar y representar mejor dicho uso. Aquí no hay ninguna razón *a priori* para favorecer un método en detrimento de otro. Sin embargo, al determinar lo que tiene sentido decir y apreciar la prioridad del uso en nuestras prácticas lingüísticas reales, habrá filósofos que tomarán direcciones muy distintas a las de los formalistas o informalistas. Plantearán preguntas muy diferentes con métodos muy diveros a los que emplean tanto los formalistas como los informalistas. Esto se ilustra en la obra de Rawls. Se sostiene además que la descripción wittgensteineana (sin duda una técnica informalista) puede ser útil para disolver cierto reto —que consideramos erróneo— para Rawls sobre la realidad o la coherencia del propio concepto de justicia.