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PHILOSOHICAL SEMANTICS

REINTEGRATING THEORETICAL PHILOSOPHY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface xi

Acknowledgments xviii

Chapter I 1
Introduction
1. Ernst Tugendhat's analysis of singular predicative statements
2. The virtue of comprehensiveness

Appendix to Chapter I 8
How Do Proper Names Really Work? (Cutting the Gordian Knot)
1. A meta-descriptivist rule for proper names
2. Identification rules at work
3. Objection of vagueness
4. Signification
5. Ignorance and error
6. Rigidity
7. Rules changeability
8. Names versus descriptions
9. Autonomous definite descriptions
10. Kripke's counterexamples
11. Donnellan's counterexamples
12. Explanatory failure of the causal-historical view

Chapter II 42
The Most Suitable Methodology for Conceptual Analysis
1. Common sense and meaning
2. Ambitious versus modest common sense
3. Resisting changes in worldviews
4. Primacy of established knowledge
5. Philosophizing by examples
6. Tacit knowledge of meaning: traditional explanation
7. A very simple model of semantic-cognitive rule

8. Criteria versus symptoms
9. Challenges to the traditional explanation (i): John McDowell
10. Challenges to the traditional explanation (ii): Gareth Evans
11. Unreflected semantic cognitions
12. Conclusion

Appendix to Chapter II 79
Modal Illusions: Against Supra-Epistemic Metaphysical Identities
Addendum: disposing of externalism

Chapter III 117
Wittgensteinian Semantics
1. Semantic-cognitive link
2. Why cannot reference be meaning?
3. Failure of Russell's atomistic referentialism
4. Meaning as a function of use
5. Meaning as a kind of rule
6. Meaning as associations of rules
7. Meaning and language-games
8. Meaning and form of life
9. Tying the threads together
10. Criteria and symptoms revisited
11. Transgressions of the internal limits of language
12. The form of semantic-cognitive rules
13. What is wrong with the private language argument?
14. Concluding remarks

Appendix to Chapter III 157
Trope Theory and the Unsustainable Lightness of Being
1. Introducing tropes
2. Tropes and universals
3. Tropes and concrete particulars
4. Formal tropes
5. Conclusion

Chapter IV 182
An Extravagant Reading of Fregean Semantics
1. Reference of a singular term
2. Sense of a singular term
3. Reference of a predicative expression
4. Ontological level

5. Referring to particularized properties (tropes)
6. Difficulties with the concept of unsaturation
7. Unsaturation as ontological dependence
8. Sense of a predicative term
9. The dependence of the predicative sense
10. The concept of horse paradox
11. Existence as a property of concepts
12. Existence as a property of conceptual rules
13. Two naïve objections
14. Attributing existence to objects
15. The existence of objects and its identification rules
16. Existence of spatiotemporal locations: indexicals
17. Advantages of the higher-order view of existence
18. Ubiquity of existence
19. Answering some final objections
20. Reference again: a metaphysical excurse (Mill)
21. The reference of a sentence as its truth-value
22. Logical structure of facts
23. Ontological nature of facts
24. Church's slingshot argument
25. Sub-facts and grounding facts
26. Taking seriously the sentence's reference as a fact
27. The riddle of identity in difference
28. Contexts of interest: no need for a necessary a posteriori
29. Sense of sentences: the thought
30. The thought as the truth-bearer
31. Facts as true thoughts?
32. The thought as a verifiability rule
33. Frege's Platonism
34. Avoiding Frege's Platonism
35. Further ontological consequences
36. A short digression on contingent futures
37. Conclusion

Appendix to Chapter IV 288
Frege, Russell, and the Puzzles of Reference
1. Russell's solutions to the puzzles of reference
2. Fregean solutions to the same puzzles
3. Reviewing Fregean assumptions
4. Reviewing Russell's assumptions
5. Building a bridge between both views

6. Conclusion

Chapter V 313
Verificationism Redeemed
1. Origins of semantic verificationism
2. Wittgensteinian verificationism
3. Verifiability rule as a criterial rule
4. Objection 1: the principle is self-refuting
5. Objection 2: a formalist illusion
6. Objection 3: verificational holism
7. Objection 4: existential-universal asymmetry
8. Objection 5: arbitrary indirectness
9. Objection 6: empirical counterexamples
10. Objection 7: formal counterexamples
11. Objection 8: skepticism about rules
12. Defending analyticity
13. Conclusion

Appendix to Chapter V 359
The Only Key to Solving the Humean Problem of Induction
1. Formulating the Humean argument
2. The basic idea
3. Reformulating PF

Chapter VI 371
Sketch of a Unified Theory of Truth
1. The deceptive simplicity of correspondence
2. Analysis of correspondence (1): structural isomorphism
3. Analysis of correspondence (2): categorial match
4. Analysis of correspondence (3): intentionality and causality
5. Exemplifying correspondence
6. Compatibility between verificationism and correspondence
7. Formal definitions of truth
8. Negative truths
9. Self-referentiality
10. Pragmatics of the correspondence relation
11. Retrograde procedures
12. A more complex case
13. General statements
14. Some funny facts
15. Expansion to formal sciences

16. Why can analytic truth be called true?
17. The insufficiency of coherence
18. Coherence as a mediator
19. Roles of empirical coherence
20. Reverend David's case
21. What about the truth of the truth-maker?
22. Objection of the linguistic-cognitive circle
23. Answering the objection of the linguistic-cognitive circle
24. The argument of illusion
25. Answering the argument of illusion
26. The argument of science and its answer
27. Question: How do we warrant the perception of external content?
28. Answer: A definitional criterion of external reality
29. Proving the existence of the external world
30. Skeptical scenarios
31. Verification and intentionality: Husserl
32. Solving two Husserlian problems
33. Truth and factual existence again
34. The rule's structural mirroring of the world
35. Conclusion

Appendix to Chapter VI 463
Discovery of Wine

References 465

It’s not madness that turns the world upside down. It’s conscience.
Bernard Malamud

PREFACE

Niemand weiß noch, wer künftig in jenem Gehäuse wohnen wird und ob am Ende dieser ungeheuren Entwicklung ganz neue Propheten oder eine mächtige Wiedergeburt alter Gedanken und Ideale stehen werden, oder aber – wenn keins von beiden – mechanisierte Versteinerung, mit einer Art von krampfhaftem sich wichtig nehmen verbrämt. Dann allerdings könnte für die "letzten Menschen" dieser Kulturentwicklung das Wort zur Wahrheit werden: "Fachmenschen ohne Geist, Genußmenschen ohne Herz: dies Nichts bildet sich ein, eine nie vorher erreichte Stufe des Menschentums erstiegen zu haben."
[No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For the 'last man' of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: 'Specialist without spirit, sensualist without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of humanity never before achieved.']
—*Max Weber*

The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.
—*Wilfrid Sellars*

Making empty is the result of making small.
—*Malcolm Bull*

Science (mainly applied science) rises, while culture (artistic, religious, philosophical) falls. Whereas culture was once a source of values, today science and technology have made cultural values seem superfluous.

The critical theory of society has offered some explanations for this, drawing on Max Weber's basic idea of the *disenchantment of the world* (*Entzauberung der Welt*). According to him, Western society has undergone a long and seemingly irreversible process of rationalization, in which a scientific-technological society, characterized by increasing bureaucratic rationality, gradually becomes alienated from the values, traditions, and sentiments of older forms of social thinking and acting, without having developed suitable resources to fill the void left behind.

As a result, in a scientifically oriented society, instrumental reason tends to prevail over valuing reason, furthering science and technology at the expense of an adequate substitute for the traditional aesthetic, mystical and humanistic cultural practices, which the available science remains unable to replace. Sociologists have used terms like 'anomia,' 'alienation,' and 'nihilism' to designate the negative individual and social effects of this mismatch between science and humanistic thinking, complaining that our technological world demands forms of cultural alienation to feed itself. Mass culture is a poor attempt to fill the gap; another is scientism.

Given the pressure of modern social forms resulting from rapidly spreading disenchantment, we should not wonder that a kind of philosophy prevails that all too often materially and institutionally simulates the methods and aims of particular scientific fields. In fact, it often emulates the sciences in a manner suggesting the way much of continental philosophy has emulated rhetorical-literary forms, that is, taking over the place of the most proper forms of philosophical argumentation with the effect of losing much of its relation to truth. As a fact, a scientistic attempt to 'disenchant philosophy' is incoherent because science in a wide sense must be 'consensualizable public knowledge' (John Ziman), opposed in this way from the inevitably non-consensualizable philosophical activity, often turning itself into a mix of pseudo-science and bad philosophy. Hence, a scientistic attempt to disenchant philosophy is, in fact, a thinly veiled attempt of 're-enchantment.' However, it must be a deficient one, insofar as the epistemic place of philosophy in its central domains is by intrinsic necessity deeply ingrained in older forms of a pluralist conjectural argumentative endeavor aiming comprehensiveness, which cannot be reduced to the domain of a particular science without being severely mutilated.

We can feel this tension in praxis: by taking into account only the discussions of recent years, as science does, one might pretend that the philosophical community is going through the same linear development as science, only to find itself some time later lost in a confusing variety of foreseeable *culs-de-sac*. But an inevitably segmented 'minute philosophy' of the 'last novelty' made for 'immediate consumption' by and for small self-protective cliques of specialists and related scientists no longer seems, as in the tradition, to be an independent conjectural undertaking making balanced use of whatever new scientific knowledge can serve its purposes. More often, it appears often as a busy handmaiden of science suffering from loss of identity and self-esteem; a forcefully particularized pseudo-scientific guesswork, an atomized conjectural endeavor that does not look beyond its own narrow interests. This guesswork scarcely touches the central

philosophical problems inherited from the philosophical tradition or touches them in a way that is unrecognizably deformed by their own reductive-positivist perspective. They seem unprepared to see that in its most central domains philosophy should absorb science instead of being absorbed by science.

In pointing to this, I am far from embracing Manichaeism. I am not claiming that for science to exert great influence on philosophy is inevitably specious and unfruitful. There are many useful limited ways of doing philosophy. Often, particularized philosophy furthers the development of particular sciences or develops into a new field that approaches science, as in the well succeed case of speech acts theory. Moreover, there are felicitous cases, like the rapid proliferation of competing theories of consciousness over the last five decades, which serves as a striking example of fruitful philosophical work very closely associated with the development of empirical science that has deepened the field of investigation. And these are only a few cases among many.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that this same intellectual movement can easily become an ideologically motivated agenda if it tempts the theoretical philosopher to import new knowledge from particular sciences – formal or empirical – in ways that cause him to lose sight of the vast and plural scope of the philosophical landscape. A possible consequence of this is what can be aptly labeled *expansionist scientism*: an effort to reduce some wide domain of philosophy to the scope of investigative strategies and categories derived from a new more or less established particular science. In order to achieve this aim, the particular (formal or empirical) scientific field must be expanded in order to answer questions belonging to some more central domain of philosophy, using a reductionist strategy that underestimates philosophy's encompassing and multifaceted character. An earlier example of expansionist scientism was in my view Pythagoreanism, which unsuccessfully tried to find answers to the problems of life using the newly developed science of numbers. Today's example would be modal logic, which has also generated a fair amount of expansionist scientism. The price one must pay for this may be that persistent, distinctive philosophical difficulties, which cannot be accommodated within the new particularizing model must be minimized if not quietly swept under the carpet.

A chief inconsistency of scientism arises from the fact that while sciences are in various ways all particular, philosophy is most properly 'holistic': As Wittgenstein once wrote, the difficulty of philosophy is that its problems are so interconnected that it is impossible to solve any one philosophical problem without first having solved all the others. Insofar as

his claim is true, it means that a persistent difficulty of the central philosophical problems is that we need a proper grasp of the whole to be able to evaluate and answer them properly. Indeed, this is what can make philosophical understanding so unbearably complex and multifarious. And the lack of this kind of comprehensiveness is what can make fragmented contemporary analytic philosophy often appear like a headless turkey running around aimlessly. Nonetheless, taking account of parts as belonging to a whole, trying to see things *sub specie totius*, is what the great systems of classical philosophy – such as those of Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel – strove to achieve, even if paying a price that we are now better able to appreciate as unavoidably high in terms of misleading and aporetic speculation. Nonetheless, it would be too easy and hasty to conclude that *true comprehensiveness* is no longer a fundamental desideratum of philosophy (Wittgenstein was well aware of this when he called for more '*Übersichtlichkeit*').

There is also an internal reason for the narrowness and fragmentation of much of our present linguistic-analytical philosophy that can be explained as follows. The new Anglo-American philosophy – from W. V-O. Quine to Donald Davidson, and from Saul Kripke to Hilary Putnam and Timothy Williamson – has challenged a great variety of inherited commonsense starting points and challenged them in often undeniably insightful and imaginative ways, although in my view with ultimately unsustainable results. Because of this, a considerable part of theoretical philosophy has increasingly lost touch with its intuitive commonsense grounding in the way things *prima facie* seem to be and for the most part really are.

Take, for instance, the concept of meaning: the word 'meaning' was challenged by Quine as too vague a noise to be reasonably investigated. But an approach is inevitably limited if it, moved by contentious arguments, starts from a kind of positivist-reductionist perspective that denies or ignores commonsense certainties, like the indisputable fact that meanings exist and demand an appropriate explanation. Indeed, using the strategy of skeptically questioning all kinds of deeply ingrained truisms, scientistically oriented philosophers have sawed off the branches they were sitting on. The reason for this is that the result of the adopted strategy couldn't be other than replacing true comprehensiveness with a superficializing positivistic fragmentation of inevitably misleadingly-grounded philosophical concerns. This movement ends by plunging philosophy into what Scott Soames confidently called the 'age of specialization,' while Susan Haack with a healthy touch of pessimism would call it 'a disastrous age of fragmentation.'

Admittedly, this fragmentation can be regarded as dividing to conquer; but it may also be a matter of dividing to subjugate, and what is here to be

subjugated is more often the philosophical intellect. Indeed, by focusing too much on the trees, we may lose sight of the philosophical forest and thereby even of where the trees are and how to compare them. Without the well-reasoned assumption of some deep common sense truisms, no proper *descriptive metaphysics*, to use P. F. Strawson's expression, remains possible. And without this, the only path left for originality in philosophy of language, after rigorous training in techniques of argumentation, may turn out to be the use of new formalistic pyrotechnics of unknown value or the production of intellectual artificialities of scarce intelligibility and suspicious depth. This would have the end-effect of blocking paths of inquiry, disarming adequate philosophical analysis and increasing the risk that the whole enterprise will degenerate into a sort of scholastic, fragmented, vacuous intellectual *Glasperlenspiel.*

It may be that practitioners of reductive scientistic philosophy are aware of the problem, but they have found plausible excuses for neglecting to deal with it. Some have suggested that any attempt to do philosophy on a comprehensive level would not suffice to meet the present standards of scholarly adequacy demanded by the academic community. But in saying this they forget that philosophy does not need to be pursued too close on the heels of new advances in the sciences, which are continually producing and handing down new authoritative developments. Philosophy largely remains an autonomous *cultural* enterprise: it is inherently conjectural and dependent on metaphorical elements indispensable to its pursuit of comprehensiveness (Aristotle, calling his first philosophy 'the *searched for* science' was well aware of this). Indeed, most of philosophy remains a relatively free cultural enterprise with a right to controlled speculation, experimentation, and even transgression, though most properly done in the pursuit of truth.

Others have concluded that today it is impossible to develop a truly encompassing theoretical philosophy. For them this kind of philosophy cannot succeed because of the difficulties imposed by the overwhelming amount of information required, putting the task far beyond the cognitive capacity of individual human minds. We might even be – to borrow Colin McGinn's original metaphor – *cognitively closed* to finding decisive solutions for the great traditional problems of philosophy in the sense that we aren't adequately wired to solve them. That is, in our efforts to do ambitious comprehensive philosophy, we are like chimps trying to develop the theory of relativity. Just as they lack sufficient mental capacity to solve the problems of relativistic mechanics, we lack sufficient mental capacity to develop comprehensive philosophy and will therefore never succeed!

Hence, if we wish to make progress, we should shift our efforts to easier tasks...

This last answer seems specious and borders on defeatism. The very ability to initiate the discussion of broadly-inclusive philosophy suggests that we might also be able to accomplish our task. As Wittgenstein once noted, if we are able to pose an appropriate question, it is because we are also in principle able to find its answer. In contrast to human thinkers, one indication that chimps could never develop a theory of relativity is that they are unable to even pose questions such as what would happen if they could move at the speed of light, as Einstein did. Moreover, even if the total amount of scientific knowledge available to us has increased immensely, it may well be that the amount of really essential information needed to answer any given question is sufficiently limited for us to grasp and apply. Very often the science needed to do philosophy can be limited to very general findings. Furthermore, not all philosophical approaches need to be taken into account, since they are often superimposed or displaced. The main difficulty may reside in the circumstances, strategies and authenticity of attempts, in limits imposed on the context of discovery, rather than in the sheer impossibility of progress. In any case, it is a fact that in the so-called philosophy of linguistic analysis true comprehensiveness has almost disappeared in the recent years. However, my guess is that the main reason isn't impossibility in principle, but rather *the loss of a suitable cultural soil in which a more comprehensive philosophy could flourish*.

In this book, I begin by arguing that more fruitful soil can be found if we start with a better reasoned and more affirmative appreciation of commonsense truisms, combined with a more pluralistic approach, always prepared to incorporate the relevant – formal and empirical – results of science. Perhaps it is precisely against the uncomfortable return of a broader pluralistic approach that much of the mainstream of our present philosophy of language secretly struggles. Awareness of this can be obscured by some sort of dense, nearly scholastic scientistic atmosphere, so thick that seasoned practitioners barely notice it surrounding them. The intellectual climate sometimes recalls the Middle Ages, when philosophical investigation was allowed, providing it left unchallenged established religious dogmas. I even entertain the suspicion that in some quarters the attempt to advance any plausible comprehensive philosophy of language against the institutional power of reductive scientism runs the risk of being ideologically discouraged as a project and silenced as a fact.

Ernst Tugendhat, who (together with Jürgen Habermas) attempted with considerable success to develop comprehensive philosophy in the seventies, seems to have hoisted the white flag by admitting that the heyday of

philosophy is past. The problem is in my view aggravated because we live in a time of widespread indifference concerning high culture, as I pointed out at the beginning – a time heavily influenced by a steady, almost exponential development of science and technology that forcefully minimizes the role of valuing reason. Though quite indispensable from the viewpoint of instrumental reason, our scientifically biased age tends to impose a compartmentalized form of alienation on philosophical research that works against more broadly oriented attempts to understand reality.

In the present book, I insist on swimming against the tide. My main task here – a risky one – is to establish the foundations of a more comprehensive philosophy of meaning and reference, while arguing against some main reductionist-scientistic approaches that are blocking the most promising paths of inquiry. Hence, it is an attempt to restore its deserved integrity to the analytic philosophy of language, without offending either common sense or science; an effort to give a balanced, systematic and sufficiently plausible overview of meaning and the mechanisms of reference, using bridges laboriously constructed between certain summits of philosophical thought. In this way, I hope to realize something of the old philosophical ambition of a comprehensive synthesis, insofar as this still sounds like a reasonable undertaking.

Paris, 2017

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Before any acknowledgments, I must emphasize Wittgenstein's major influence on my philosophical outlook. His exceedingly suggestive and multifarious approach is more far-reaching than unprepared readers could possibly grasp, and the originality of his philosophical mind is indebted to his freedom from the burdens of the academic factory. Frege's unprecedented work was equally indispensable in structuring the subject under investigation. I must also emphasize as well the strong influence on my thinking of two living philosophers: Ernst Tugendhat and John Searle.

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