

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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INTELLECT: MIND OVER MATTER

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CHAPTER TEN:
ABOUT HOW ONE REALM OF MEANINGS UNDERLIES THE
DIVERSITY OF LANGUAGES

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In Chapters 8 and 9 (Issues 1043 and 1044), I defended the thesis of empirical realism: that the independent reality of the world in which we live is evident from our common experience of it. It is one and the same reality for all of us, and in the experience that we have of it there is a common core that we all share. This runs counter to the myriad forms of idealism that abound in modern and contemporary philosophy, which deny a knowable reality independent of the mind and which regard the mind's own structure or inherent forms and categories as constitutive of human experience. The plurality of worldviews that the mind constructs become a plurality of man-made worlds.

The problems we face in chapters 10 and 11 deal with the other side of the same coin. There may be one and the same reality for all of us and human experience may have a common core, but is the mind, and especially the intellect, of all human beings essentially the same? Is there one human mind, having specific properties common to all members of the human species, just as there are common anatomical and physiological properties common to all of us? Or is there a diversity of minds varying according to the diversity of languages in use and varying with the diversity of cultures in which the mind is reared?

In short, do human beings, living in the same real world, have divergent mentalities because of the diverse languages they use and because of the differing cultural conditions under which they have been reared? In the twentieth century that question is answered affirmatively by philosophers of language and by cultural anthropologists, and that affirmation lends support to the twentieth century forms of idealism that we have considered in the preceding chapters. Against these mistaken views, I am going to try to defend the

thesis that there is one and the same human mind in all members of the species, not a primitive and a civilized mind, not a Western and an oriental mind, not an ancient and a modern mind.

That thesis can be stated more generally by saying that no qualifying adjective preceding the word “mind” signifies an essential difference in the mind’s powers and operations. The many different languages that human beings use result in superficial differences in the way they think, none of which is an insuperable barrier to communication. The many diverse cultures in which human beings are reared result in superficial differences in the habits they form and the customs practiced, none of which abolishes the common humanity that is most significantly represented by the human mind they all possess. In support of these contentions, I will deal with the diversity of languages in this chapter and the diversity of cultures in the next.

I have repeatedly used the word “mind” in the preceding paragraphs, but it is man’s intellect, not the human mind as a whole, with which I am mainly concerned. No one doubts that human beings everywhere and at all times have exactly the same bodily organs that constitute man’s sensitive apparatus—the same brain and central nervous system and the same organs: visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, taste, kinesthetic, and other sensory receptors. These are all anatomical properties, common to all normal members of the human species. Hence the sensitive powers of the human mind, including sensitive memory and imagination, are much the same in all human beings. The diversity of languages is unlikely to affect their operation to whatever extent their operation is not Intellectually influenced.

However, to the extent that the way persons think and understand affects the way they perceive and imagine, basic intellectual differences among human beings will result in basic differences in their perceptions and imaginations. What I am contending, therefore, is that the diversity of languages does not produce basic intellectual differences.

In what respects are human languages diverse? First of all, they differ in the physical notations they employ in oral and written speech—the audible sounds and the visible marks they employ. Second, they differ in their grammar and syntax the ways in which these sounds and marks are ordered to make sentences or statements. Third, they differ in the scope or range of their vocabularies—in the number of words and idiomatic phrases available for

the communication of thought and to express experiences that may be either private or public.

Some languages may lack words or phrases that other languages possess for the expression of certain experiences or the communication of certain thoughts. The expression of experience and the communication of thought that is facilitated by the grammar and syntax of one language may be impeded by the grammar and syntax of another.

In all these respects languages differ, but underlying all these differences is something common to all of them: the meanings they convey when one human being engages in conversation with another. Without these meanings, the audible sounds uttered are just noise; the visible marks written, printed, or engraved are just nonsense doodling. Where do the meanings come from? Not from the audible sounds or visible marks, for they are transformed from meaningless physical notations into meaningful words by their acquisition of meaning. A meaningful word cannot acquire the meaning that its physical notation has come to possess from the meanings possessed by other words in the lexicon of a given language; for all the meaningful words in the lexicon language are so interconnected that no one word or set of words is capable of conferring meaning upon another word or set of words.*

*For a fuller analysis of the process by which meaningless physical notations become meaningful words and how this affects their lexical meaning, see an earlier book of mine, *Some Questions About Language* (1976), especially chapters 2-3.

What, then, is the ultimate source of all the meanings that are attached to the words that alphabetical languages use and to all the ideographs used in nonalphabetical languages? The only tenable answer is the human mind and especially the intellect.

Words acquire meaning, lose meaning, change meaning, and are for the most part ambiguous and have a variety of meanings. For these things to occur meanings must exist in and of themselves. Where? In the human mind and especially in its intellectual part.

There are two kinds of signs: signals, and referential signs. Referential signs are not signals in the way that clouds signal rain or smoke signals fire, but signs in the way that the word "cloud" signifies a visible object in the sky and the word "smoke" signifies a visible object on earth.

All words are one kind of referential sign, the kind that is instrumental in the conveyance of meaning. Instrumental signs have two

properties: one is the fact that they are themselves perceptible physical marks or sounds; the other is that to become words, those perceptible physical marks or sounds must acquire meaning.

If I may misuse the word “idea” to stand for the cognitive elements in the human mind—its perceptions, memories, images, empirical concepts, and theoretical constructs—I can then say that ideas are the other kind of referential sign. They are formal, not instrumental, signs. They differ from instrumental signs in two respects.

One is that they are themselves inapprehensible. As I have pointed out in an earlier chapter of this book, we are never, and cannot be, consciously aware of our own ideas, but only of the objects they refer to—not of our perceptions but of the perceptible objects we perceive; not of our memories but of the memorable events we remember; not of our concepts but of the intelligible objects we understand by means of them. In all these differing dimensions, the idea is not *that which* we apprehend, but *that by which* we apprehend its characteristic object.

The other respect in which ideas as formal signs differ from words as instrumental signs is that, unlike words that *acquire* and *change* meaning and can have many meanings, each idea is a meaning. Formal signs do not acquire meanings, change meaning, or have many meanings. Each is a single meaning, which is its reference to the object perceived, imagined, remembered, or understood. Words as instrumental signs get their meaning by being imposed upon the objects referred to by ideas as formal signs. By being thus associated with ideas, words *express* the meanings that ideas *are*.

Let me make this last point a little more explicit. The radical difference between words and ideas is the difference between *having* a meaning or *many* meanings and *being* a meaning and just *one* meaning. If the world did not contain entities that simply *are* meanings, each one just one meaning, then the world could not contain entities that *have* meaning, meanings they acquire, lose, and change.*

*Jacques Derrida’s doctrine of deconstruction, as applied to the interpretation of the words on a page, is as self-refuting as the skeptical assertion that it is true (or that it is false) that no statement is either true or false. Because of that fact, I have paid no attention to the doctrine of deconstruction, but I would like to call attention to the fact that the account in this chapter of the relation of language to mind as the realm in which meanings exist goes a long way toward explaining the profound mistake made by the deconstructionists.

An idea cannot change its meaning or lose its meaning without ceasing to be the meaning that it is. An idea cannot be ambiguous,

for to be ambiguous it would have to be several diverse meanings, which is impossible because that is tantamount to saying that one idea can become two or more ideas.

The human mind, and especially its Intellect, is the realm in which meanings exist, the meanings that words acquire when they are imposed on the objects referred to by ideas. It can, therefore, hardly be the case that the different languages human beings use cause them to have fundamentally different minds and intellects.

The fact that a particular language does not contain words to express certain experiences or ideas or the fact that its syntax makes the expression of certain thoughts extremely difficult indicates defects that can be remedied.* It does not indicate that persons using that particular language have minds or intellects different in their fundamental powers from the minds or intellects of those using a language that has the requisite words and syntax.

*Among the thousands upon thousands of human languages, any particular language may be defective in the respects indicated as compared with another particular language. I am not saying that some languages are perfect and others are defective.

Persons who have been reared using a defective language suffer from a nurtural not a natural defect. Nurtural defects can be remedied. Translation is the remedy that is always available. This may require the addition of words and phrases to a language that lacks them. It may require circumlocution that is cumbersome. It may require syntactical refinements and subtleties. But all these things are possible because any human mind can acquire the ideas possessed by another human mind.

Using ideas, any human mind can relate them to one another and order them in the same way that any other human mind can, and so there is a universal grammar that is inherent in the nature of the human mind and that underlies the plurality of conventional grammars that control the diverse modes of syntax in the plurality of conventional languages.


The simplest way of making the point that there are many human languages but only one human mind and intellect is to say that human beings can communicate with one another about anything. Communication may be difficult because of defects in the diverse languages that the persons may respectively use, but since those defects are always remediable, communication is always possible. It is always possible for one person to teach and for another person to learn the ideas that the one possesses and the other lacks.

If something is perceptible, any human being should be able to perceive it. If something is intelligible, any human being should be able to understand it. If something is thinkable, any human being should be able to think it. If something is knowable, any human being should be able to know it.

Of course, there are many exceptions to this statement of an ideal in principle. But they result from intellectual deficiencies or other mental impairments, such as sensory deprivations or loss of sensory acuity, never from language defects. Given adequate sensory equipment and adequate intellectual power, there are no unsurmountable obstacles to communication between one person and another, because what one of them can teach, the other can learn. Language defects may create difficulties in this process, but the difficulties are always remediable.

The ideal in principle thus remains: all conventional languages are completely translatable; all human experience (all that is public, not private) and all human thought are completely communicable. “To every fact which can be stated in one language, there will be a correlate which can be stated in another,” Professor A. J. Ayer has written, going on to say, “There will be a loss of economy, but no loss of information.”*

*“Philosophy and Language,” in *Clarity Is Not Enough* (1963), p. 427. See also C. I. Lewis’s *Mind and the World Order* (1920), pp. 94-95.

These two facts universal translatability and universal communicability—attest to the universality of the human mind and Intellect regardless of the diversity of human languages. Not only is reality one and the same for all human beings. Not only does our experience of that reality have a common core in which we all share. But by virtue of having the same human nature with the same species-specific properties, each of us has a mind and intellect that is essentially the same in all other human beings. 

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