> But language is a treacherous thing, a most unsure vehicle, and it can seldom arrange descriptive words in such a way that they will not inflate the facts—by help of the reader's imagination, which is always ready to take a hand and work for nothing, and do the bulk of it at that.   **—Mark Twain**

SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT LANGUAGE

*A Theory of Human Discourse
and Its Objects*

Mortimer Adler

P r e f a c e

The subject of this book has been of continuing interest to me over a span of fifty years. My first engagement with it occurred in 1922 when I delivered before the Graduate Philosophy Club of Columbia University a paper on the philosophy and psychology of meaning. Further, in my memory of stages in the development of my thought about the subject are lectures that I delivered at St. John's College in Annapolis in 1938; lectures delivered at the University of Chicago and at Yale University in the 1940s and 1950s; certain chapters and notes in *The Difference of Man and The Difference It Makes,* published in 1967; and once again lectures delivered at St. John's College in 1971 and 1972.

The most recent lectures at St. John's College are distinguished from all the earlier formulations in that they reflect sustained research and discussion of the subject carried on at the Institute for Philosophical Research beginning in 1966. That work began to bear fruit in 1969, when John N. Deely joined the Institute's staff as a Senior Research Fellow and undertook to carry forward the researches and discussions that have eventuated in the writing of this book. Dr. Deely has surveyed the vast contemporary literature dealing with theories of language, some of them philosophical, some not. In addition, the discussions in which he and I have engaged have contributed to my understanding of certain points in traditional doctrines that bear on the problems of language, and sharpened my understanding of other points in ancient and mediaeval thought that help to solve those problems. I am indebted to him and regret that unresolved differences of opinion between us about certain aspects of a theory that we otherwise share prevent him from associating his name with mine in the authorship of this book. He will presently publish under his own name articles expressing his reservations or dissenting views, one such forthcoming article is cited in the Bibliographical Appendix.

I have long been of the opinion that the exposition of a philosophical doctrine should be as spare, trim, and structured as the demonstration of a sequence of theorems in a mathematical monograph. I know of no better way to achieve these qualities than by in orderly series of questions which pose the problems that a philosophical theory attempts to solve.

In every chapter or section of the exposition, the reader should be informed of the questions to be answered and told why they have been raised. Then, as he proceeds from question to question, he should be left in no doubt about the state of the argument and the direction of the analysis.

Too often a philosophical work compels the reader to peruse page after page of discussion before he finds out, if he ever does, what problem or problems the discussion hopes to resolve. Sometimes he is even compelled to formulate the problems for himself, inferring what they are from the general drift of the discussion.

This seems to me wasteful of the reader's energies and a source of distraction, if not bemusement, to his mind. It also permits the writer to digress—to follow many bypaths and plough through many thickets of questionable bearing. The relevance of the writer's remarks or observations, and even of his arguments, has not been rigorously controlled by a set of very specific questions

that call for clear and satisfactory answers and for nothing beyond that.

I have tried to make the exposition of the philosophical doctrine that is the substance of this book meet the requirements just set forth. But in one respect the exposition must differ from the order of a mathematical treatise, n which the demonstration of an earlier theorem does not depend on the theorems or demonstrations that follow. A philosophical exposition cannot be that rigid in order. The reader of this book will find that, in some cases, the answer to an earlier question will explicitly mention but will also postpone for later treatment matters that affect the answer being given. Until later questions are answered, the earlier answers may not be fully understood, adequately supported, or cogently defended.

The manner of exposition that I have adopted precludes, as incongruous, the citation of particular authors, ancient or modern, whose theories are wholly rejected, criticized and corrected, or modified and amplified. It also precludes quotations from their writings, footnote commentaries on them, and polemical digressions in which ad hoc arguments are developed.

I have added two sections at the end of the book in the hope of compensating somewhat for these preclusions. One is an Epilogue which is partly historical and partly polemical in character and in which particular philosophers are mentioned by name. The other is a Bibliographical Appendix which is divided into four sections. The first lists writers with whose theories of language the theory expounded in this book is in most fundamental disagreement. The second lists writers whose theories are rejected on certain points but accepted on others. The third lists writers whose theories are accepted on essential points, but modified, amplified, or corrected on others. In addition, there is a fourth section that lists a number of other books or articles which have been examined but which are judged to be of minor relevance to the theory expounded in this book.

Readers of this book will come to it either well versed in or unacquainted with the literature on the philosophy of language, both traditional and contemporary. For those who are not acquainted with the literature, the absence of footnotes and of reference to particular authors will not be an impediment to their understanding of the theory here being proposed or of the views which it criticizes or rejects. However, if they become interested in controversial points, the Bibliographical Appendix will direct their attention to the works they should examine to pursue that interest.

For those who are well versed in the literature of the subject, footnotes and references to particular authors are not necessary. They will recognize the theories being criticized or rejected. However, even for them, the four-part Bibliographical Appendix may be useful as a guide to the main points at issue in the controversy on which this book takes a definite stand.

The dedication of this book, out of friendship and gratitude, to Jacques Maritain reflects not only a long personal association but also a particular debt. It was the reading of his *Degrees of Knowledge,* translated and published in 1938, which gave me the pivotal insight that is indispensable to a solution of the basic problem of meaning; and it was that book, as well as other writings of Maritain, especially his little essay "Sign and Symbol" (in *Ransoming the Time,* 1941), which brought to my attention the *Treatise on Signs* by Jean Poinsot. A translation by Dr. Deely of this portion of Poinsot's *Cursus Phlilosophlicus,* done in the course of his work on language at the Institute for Philosophical Research, is scheduled for publication in the near future.

I wish, in addition, to express my gratitude to colleagues at the Institute who have read the manuscript of this book and given me the benefit of their criticisms and suggestions: Charles Van Doren, William Gorman, Otto Bird, John Van Doren, and William O'Meara. To the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies and to its President, Joseph Slater, I am indebted for providing the auspices, under which this book was written, as Scholar-in-residence at Aspen during the summer of 1973.

Mortimer J. Adler
Chicago
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Chapter One. The Scope of a Philosophy of Language

Preamble

Language being the subject of many inquiries, there are many approaches to the consideration of its origin and nature, its properties and uses, its defects and the ways of overcoming them. Philosophy is only one among the disciplines or modes of inquiry that are concerned with language. This concern on the part of philosophy may have arisen initially from difficulties encountered in the use of language for philosophical discourse, but it extends beyond that to the uses of language in ordinary discourse, in all other disciplines, and for all other purposes; nor can philosophy avoid being concerned with the substitution of specially constructed languages for ordinary language as instruments of discourse.

While the philosophical interest in language would thus appear to be all-encompassing in scope, the philosophical approach to language is in fact limited to the kind of questions that it is legitimate for a philosopher to try to answer. There are many questions about language that can be answered only by historical research, by the empirical methods of the social and behavioral sciences, or by one or another field of humanistic scholarship, such as philology. It is necessary, therefore, to define the scope of a philosophy of language by stating the problems with which philosophy is competent to deal, and by drawing a line of demarcation that separates these problems from other closely related problems that are beyond philosophy's scope and, in addition, are posterior; that is, cannot be adequately dealt with unless and until prior problems have been solved.

This book as a whole is an effort to formulate the basic philosophical problems about language and to propose solutions to them. In this opening chapter, I can do no more than indicate the direction that will be taken in the chapters to follow. I will do this by trying to answer the following questions: 1. What is the primary fact that a philosophy of language should try to explain or account for? 2. What aspects of language should a philosophical approach to the subject not attempt to deal with? 3. What, specifically, should be avoided in developing a philosophical theory of language? 4. How are the philosophical problems of language related to the concerns of the logician and the grammarian in dealing with language?

Question 1. What is the primary fact that a philosophy of language should try to explain or account for?

It is either a fact or an illusion that men, using language, are able to converse or discourse with one another about matters that are public, not private. A private matter is something that is accessible to one person and one person alone, and so, strictly speaking, cannot be the subject of discourse or conversation involving two or more individuals addressing themselves to that item of consideration, whatever it is. All other matters are public, or are capable of being so. (I shall elaborate on this distinction between public and private in Chapter IV, Questions 6 and 7.)

That public matters are largely the topics of conversation among men is generally regarded as a fact beyond dispute. Yet, on the one hand, men do appear sometimes to talk to one another about a matter that is private to one of them; and, on the other hand, when they do talk to one another about a matter that they regard as something to which they have equal access, they may be deceived by their use of language into thinking that this is so; in fact, they may have nothing in common to talk about.

I propose to regard conversation about public matters as a fact even when it Is clear that the items being discussed do not exist in the physical world. That men are able to talk to one another about the physical furniture in a room that they are occupying would seem to be beyond question. They certainly also appear able to talk to one another about many items that are not present to their senses in the way that the furniture is—past events that they remember, future contingencies that they imagine or conjecture, and even items the existence of which, past, present, or future, they question and the actual or possible reality of which they discuss with one another.

It is my contention that the experience of communicating with one another, which men have when they talk to one another about items that are not immediately present to their senses, is not just an illusion to be explained away, but a reality to be explained. Only if what is here asserted to be a reality cannot be satisfactorily explained does it become a questionable assumption or even an illusion that needs to be exposed for what it is. The task of a philosophy of language, as I see it, is to construct a theory that attempts to explain the reality or fact of communication which I have taken as its point of departure. Only if we fall in that task are we required to reexamine that point of departure and ask ourselves

whether what we, and men generally, take to be a reality or a fact is, after all, only an illusion or an appearance concerning which we have all been long deceived.

In thus defining the task of a philosophy of language, I am stating its minimal obligation. There are undoubtedly other things that a philosophical theory of language should do, but this is the least it can do; and if it does not discharge this first and minimal obligation, it Is not in a position to do anything else well. The philosophical questions about language with which this book will be concerned all fall within the ambit of this primary task. To answer those questions, the theory that is advanced and defended will be a minimal theory, dealing not with all, but only with some of the questions about language that are proper for philosophers to consider.

Question 2. What aspects of language should a philosophical approach to the subject not attempt to deal with?

The use of language to express the emotions, wishes, desires, or decisions of the speaker, to convey his requests or commands to others, or to announce or recommend courses of action, is probably as frequent and commonplace as the use of language for the purpose of making statements about what is or is not the case, may or may not be the case, must or cannot be the case. Statements of the latter sort must be either true or false, whereas utterances of the former sort may be neither; when they are true, they are so only because the speaker intends to tell the truth, and when false, they are so only because the speaker indulges in intentional prevarication.

What is common to these two uses is that both may involve communication, though they need not. Insofar as any use of language involves communication, it necessarily involves the problem of how two or more individuals have some matter or item commonly before them to which they are giving their attention, or some aspect of which they are considering in one way or another. To the extent that it involves communication, and only to that extent, does the use of language fall within the scope of a philosophical theory that attempts to discharge the primary task defined in the answer to Question 1. This stricture imposes two limitations on the theory to be developed.

The first and most important of these is the elimination of any concern with the truth or falsity of the statements that men make about

reality. False statements are as readily communicable as true ones. The problem of what is involved in their being means of communication is antecedent to and independent of the problem of what is involved in their being true or false. Nevertheless, a philosophical theory of language should be able to explain how men who are engaged in talking about some common matter or item can agree or disagree about the truth or falsity of what is being said. It should be concerned with how statements can be clear and precise enough to be judged either true or false. The philosophy of language is obliged to show that such judgments are at least possible; but it is obliged to go no further than that. It stops short of the logical problems involved in showing how sentences must be interpreted in order to construe out of them propositions that are clear and precise enough to be judged true or false.

There are a number of different logical theories or systems which address themselves to this problem and offer different solutions of it. None is a theory of language as such; all presuppose a philosophy of language, sometimes explicitly, sometimes surreptitiously. A philosophical theory of language, particularly one that discharges the primary task of explaining communication among men in their discourse about public matters (i.e., items that are commonly accessible to their consideration), is antecedent to any logical theory that is concerned with construing statements so that they can be judged either true or false. A philosophy of language, in short, Is concerned with the communicability of statements that can be either true or false, but not with their truth or falsity.

The second limitation, like the first, excludes from the consideration of a philosophy of language those aspects of emotive or illocutionary utterances which go beyond their being instruments of communication. Insofar as such utterances may be about private rather than public matters, such as an individual's feelings or desires, they do raise a problem for the philosopher of language, for then it becomes necessary to explain how two individuals can talk to one another about something that, at first glance, appears to be exclusively private—a feeling experienced by one of them and not by the other. How utterances that express feelings or convey commands can be intended as communications and can be received as such is a problem that does belong to the philosophy of language; but here, as in the case of statements that can be true or false, there are logical problems about the various ways in which such utterances can be construed that are not the concern of a philosophy of language and are consequent or dependent upon the solution of the antecedent problems with which the philosophy of language is properly concerned.

Question 3. What, specifically, should be avoided in developing a philosophical theory of language?

In order to explain the fact which is its point of departure—the fact that men converse with one another about matters or items that are commonly accessible to their consideration—a philosophical theory of language cannot avoid making certain commitments that involve assertions about the existence of things other than language itself. This amounts to no more than saying that a theory which alms to explain something is required to posit whatever is needed to account for that which it sets out to explain. For example, it may be necessary to posit the existence of something as unobservable as the human mind in order to explain how language serves the purposes of communication; it may, further, be necessary to posit certain things about the way in which the mind works.

The only Justification to be given for such posits is that they are indispensable to the explanation of the facts to be accounted for. In this respect, a philosophy of language does not differ from a theory about anything else, whether it be scientific or philosophical. Any theory that seeks to explain facts or phenomena may be obliged to posit unobservable entities or operations, sometimes called "theoretical constructs," in order to discharge its function of accounting for that which is to be explained; and the only justification it can ever give, or ever needs to give, for such posits is that they are indispensable to the explanation that is called for.

I have so far mentioned the philosophical commitments that may not be avoidable in developing a theory of language which undertakes to explain the phenomena of human discourse as involving communication among men. All of these, as indicated above, should be posits consequent upon the effort to explain the chosen phenomena. None should be prior to it. That is what should be avoided in developing a philosophical theory of language; namely, philosophical commitments about the shape of the world, the structure of reality, the character of its constituents, or their relationships.

Most specifically, a philosophical theory of language should avoid prior commitments about what really does exist and can exist or about what does not exist in reality and cannot; commitments about what is knowable or unknowable; and commitments about the relation that obtains between the human mind and the human body, if they are distinct in any sense whatsoever. In other words, a

philosophy of language should avoid ontological, epistemological, and psychological commitments that are in any way prior to the consideration of the phenomena of language it seeks to explain. The philosopher of language should come to that effort with complete neutrality toward all the ontological, epistemological, or psychological commitments of which he may be aware. He may in the end turn out to favor some of these as opposed to others, but if he does, he must do so only as a consequence of his effort to explain the phenomena under consideration. The commitments he makes must be posterior, not prior, commitments—posits made solely for the explanatory purpose at hand.

The reason for this controlling stricture on the theory to be developed is not difficult to state. A philosophy of language that involved prior philosophical commitments would necessarily beg questions of truth and falsity that are not its function to decide. Such prior commitments may inevitably lead to espousing the view that ordinary language does not serve the purpose of stating the truth about reality and that, for the said purpose, a special language needs to be logically constructed. It would adopt this course because of its prior commitment to one among several competing views of reality and also because it held the view that a philosophically satisfactory language must perfectly mirror the "realities" to which it was committed. Such a theory of language, philosophically preconditioned, would thus beg all the questions that philosophers in disagreement with one another must employ language to discuss. Only by avoiding prior ontological, epistemological, and psychological commitments, can a theory of language leave such questions open and allow philosophers in disagreement about them to use language without any prejudgment of the issues to be discussed or disputed.

As will become manifest in what follows, there are grounds for thinking that ordinary language not only serves the purposes of communication among men in discourse about the commonplace matters of daily life, but that it also can serve the purposes of philosophers engaged in discourse about the issues that concern them. If it has defects and difficulties as a means of communication, as it most certainly does, these can be remedied or overcome by devices that correct its misuses and perfect its use. We need not abandon it and replace it with a system of logical constructions that draw their inspiration from question-begging commitments to certain, very special philosophical views about the constituents and structure of reality.

When we go beyond the use of language for the purposes of discourse about the affairs of daily life, we perceive that it may have to be enriched by the addition of words that belong to one or another technical vocabulary in order to serve the special purposes of philosophical, scientific, or scholarly discourse. It may even have to be largely transformed by the introduction of special symbols, as in the case of mathematics. Nevertheless, if a theory of language succeeds in explaining how language serves the purpose of communication about the affairs of daily life, then it will apply not only to ordinary language used for that purpose but also to ordinary language enriched or altered for the purposes of philosophical, scientific, and mathematical discourse.

Question 4. How are the philosophical problems of language related to the concerns of the logician and the grammarian in dealing with language?

The answer to the preceding question determines the general tenor of the answer to this one. As the logician is ultimately concerned with the capacity of statements to be true or false, and with the rules governing the validity or invalidity of statements in relation to one another, so the grammarian is concerned with correctness and incorrectness in the syntax of speech, and with the rules governing the ways in which words should or should not be related. Though they may not be exclusively normative, the disciplines of logic and grammar are certainly regulative in application. Even apart from their regulative function, logic and grammar, as sciences, presuppose the existence of language as an instrument of communication. Their problems are, therefore, posterior to the philosophical concern with the phenomena of communication.

Not only is a philosophy of language prior to logic and grammar, it must also be formulated so as to be completely neutral with respect to the plurality of logics and the variety of theoretical grammars or systems of linguistics. Its formulations should be unaffected by the preference for one system of logic as against another, or the preference for one theoretical grammar or linguistic system as against another. What has just been said would still hold true even if there were a universal grammar, or a single all-encompassing logic that provided a transformation formula for diverse systems of logic. 📖

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