

The Linguistic Turn and the Conceptual Turn

The Linguistic Turn is the title of an influential anthology edited by Richard Rorty, published in 1967. He credited the phrase to Gustav Bergmann (Bergmann 1964: 3; Rorty 1967: 9). In his introduction, Rorty (1967: 3) explained:

The purpose of the present volume is to provide materials for reflection on the most recent philosophical revolution, that of linguistic philosophy. I shall mean by “linguistic philosophy” the view that philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use.

“The linguistic turn” has subsequently become the standard vague phrase for a diffuse event – some regard it as *the* event – in twentieth-century philosophy, one not confined to signed-up linguistic philosophers in Rorty’s sense. For those who took the turn, language was somehow the central theme of philosophy.

The word “theme” is used with deliberate vagueness. It does not mean “subject matter,” for the linguistic turn was not the attempted reduction of philosophy to linguistics. The theme of a piece of music is not its subject matter. Those who viewed philosophy as an activity of dispelling confusions of linguistic origin did not see it as having a subject matter in the sense in which a science has a subject matter. But merely to regard linguistic analysis as one philosophical method among many is not yet to have taken the linguistic turn, for it is not yet to regard language as central. We will be more precise below.

There is an increasingly widespread sense that the linguistic turn is past. We will ask how far the turn has been, or should be, reversed.

Language has been regarded as central to philosophy in many different ways, which cannot all be treated together. A history of the many different forms that the linguistic turn took would be a history of much of twentieth-century philosophy. That is a task for another book, by another author. Self-indulgently, I will use a thin slice through history to introduce the contemporary issues by briefly considering some of my predecessors in the Wykeham Chair of Logic at Oxford.

A. J. Ayer was the first holder of the Chair to take the linguistic turn.¹ In 1936, back from Vienna and its Circle but not yet in the Chair, he announced an uncompromisingly formal version of linguistic philosophy:

[T]he philosopher, as an analyst, is not directly concerned with the physical properties of things. He is concerned only with the way in which we speak about them. In other words, the propositions of philosophy are not factual, but linguistic in character – that is, they do not describe the behaviour of physical, or even mental, objects; they express definitions, or the formal consequences of definitions. (Ayer 1936: 61–2)

Ayer traced his views back ultimately to the empiricism of Berkeley and Hume (Ayer 1936: 11). His contrast between definitions of words and descriptions of objects is, roughly, the linguistic analogue of Hume's contrast between relations of ideas and matters of fact. For an empiricist, the *a priori* methods of philosophy cannot provide us with knowledge of synthetic truths about matters of fact ("the behaviour of physical, or even mental, objects"); they yield only analytic truths concerning relations of ideas ("definitions, or the formal consequences of definitions"). A rather traditional empiricism later overshadowed the linguistic theme in Ayer's work.

Ayer was the predecessor of Sir Michael Dummett in the Wykeham Chair. Dummett gave a much-cited articulation of the linguistic turn, attributing it to Frege:

Only with Frege was the proper object of philosophy finally established: namely, first, that the goal of philosophy is the analysis of the

¹ Ayer's three immediate predecessors were John Cook Wilson, H. H. Joachim and H. H. Price.

structure of *thought*; secondly, that the study of *thought* is to be sharply distinguished from the study of the psychological process of *thinking*; and, finally, that the only proper method for analysing thought consists in the analysis of *language*. . . . [T]he acceptance of these three tenets is common to the entire analytical school. (Dummett 1978: 458)

On this view, thought is essentially expressible (whether or not actually expressed) in a public language, which filters out the subjective noise, the merely psychological aspects of thinking, from the inter-subjective message, that which one thinks. Dummett's own corpus constitutes one of the most imposing monuments of analytic philosophy as so defined. Unlike Ayer, he does not describe philosophical claims as definitions. Unlike Rorty, he characterizes the linguistic turn as involving distinctive claims about the subject matter of philosophy, not only about its method. On Dummett's view, Frege's insight replaced epistemology by philosophy of language as first philosophy. But this methodological innovation is supposed to be grounded in the account of the proper object of philosophy.

Elsewhere, Dummett makes clear that he takes this concern with language to be what distinguishes "analytical philosophy" from other schools (1993: 4). His account of its inception varies slightly. At one points (1993: 5), he says: "[A]nalytical philosophy was born when the 'linguistic turn' was taken. This was not, of course, taken uniformly by any group of philosophers at any one time: but the first clear example known to me occurs in Frege's *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik* of 1884." Later (1993: 27), we read: "If we identify the linguistic turn as the starting-point of analytical philosophy proper, there can be no doubt that, to however great an extent Frege, Moore and Russell prepared the ground, the crucial step was taken by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* of 1922." Presumably, in Frege the linguistic turn was a fitful insight, in Wittgenstein, a systematic conception.

That "analytical philosophers" in Dummett's sense coincide with those usually classified as such is not obvious. Some kind of linguistic turn occurred in much of what is usually called "continental [supposedly non-analytic] philosophy." That Jacques Derrida did not subscribe in his own way to Dummett's three tenets is unclear: if some stretching of terms is required, it is for the later Wittgenstein

too. Conversely, Bertrand Russell did not subscribe to the three tenets, although often cited as a paradigm “analytical philosopher.” Over the past 20 years, fewer and fewer of those who would accept the label “analytic philosophy” for their work would also claim to take the linguistic turn (I am not one of those few). Even philosophers strongly influenced by Dummett, such as Gareth Evans, Christopher Peacocke, and John Campbell, no longer give language the central role he describes. For Dummett, they belong to a tradition that has grown out of “analytical philosophy” without themselves being “analytical philosophers” (1993: 4–5). In effect, they aimed to analyze thought directly, without taking a diversion through the analysis of language. In the 1980s it became commonplace in some circles to suggest that the philosophy of mind had displaced the philosophy of language in the driving seat of philosophy.

For philosophers of mind who accepted Jerry Fodor’s (1975) influential hypothesis of a language of thought, the priority of thought to public language did not imply the priority of thought to all language, since thought itself was in a language, the brain’s computational code. In principle, someone might combine that view with Dummett’s three tenets of analytic philosophy, contrary to Dummett’s intention; he did not mean a private language. Moreover, the first-personal inaccessibility of the language of thought makes such a version of the linguistic turn methodologically very different from the traditional ones.

For those who deny the methodological priority of language to thought, the minimal fallback from Dummett’s three tenets is to reject the third but maintain the first two. They assert that the goal of philosophy is the analysis of the structure of thought, and that the study of thought is to be sharply distinguished from the study of the psychological process of thinking, but deny that the only proper method for analysing thought consists in the analysis of language. If thought has constituents, we may call them “concepts.” On this view, concepts take the place of words in Dummett’s analytical philosophy.

In practice, linguistic philosophers were often happy enough to speak of concepts rather than words, for they regarded a concept as what synonymous expressions had in common; their primary interest was in the features common to synonyms, not in the differences between them. It is therefore not too misleading to describe as *conceptual philosophers* those who accept Dummett’s first two tenets –

that the goal of philosophy is the analysis of the structure of thought, and that the study of thought is to be sharply distinguished from the study of the psychological process of thinking – whether or not they accept the third. We may also describe them as doing *conceptual philosophy*, and as having taken the *conceptual turn*.

The conceptual turn constitutes a much broader movement than the linguistic turn. It is neutral over the relative priority of language and thought. We think and talk about things – truly or falsely depending on whether they are or are not as we think or say they are. The aboutness of thought and talk is their *intentionality*; the conceptual turn puts intentionality at the centre of philosophy. This terminology indicates how little the conceptual turn is confined to what would ordinarily be called “analytic philosophy.” The phenomenological tradition may constitute another form of the conceptual turn. In the hermeneutic study of interpretation and various shades of postmodernist discourse about discourse the conceptual turn takes a more specifically linguistic form.

Have we stretched our terms so far that all philosophy is conceptual philosophy? No. On a natural view, concepts constitute only a small fraction of a largely mind-independent reality. That the goal of philosophy is in some sense to analyze that small fraction is no platitude. To put it very schematically, let *absolute idealism about the subject matter of philosophy* be the view that philosophy studies only concepts, in contrast to *ontological absolute idealism*, the wilder view that only concepts exist.² Although absolute idealism about the subject matter of philosophy does not entail ontological absolute idealism, why should we accept absolute idealism about the subject matter of philosophy if we reject ontological absolute idealism? Of course, we might reject absolute idealism about the subject matter of philosophy while nevertheless holding that the correct method for philosophy is to study its not purely conceptual subject matter by studying concepts of that subject matter. This methodological claim will be considered later; for present purposes, we merely note how much weaker it is than those formulated by Ayer and Dummett.

The claim that concepts constitute only a small fraction of reality might be opposed on various grounds. Recall that concepts were

² The “absolute” is to distinguish these forms of idealism from the corresponding “subjective” forms, in which concepts are replaced by psychological processes.

defined as the constituents of thought. If thought consists of Russellian propositions, complexes of the objects, properties, relations, and other elements of reality the proposition is about, then those objects, properties, relations, and other elements of reality are by definition concepts. In that case, ontological absolute idealism may be a triviality, because whatever exists is a constituent of various Russellian propositions, and thereby counts as a concept. However, even conceptual philosophers who accept the Russellian view of propositions will distinguish *conceptual structure*, the structure characteristic of propositions, from other sorts of structure. For example, they will analyze the atomic proposition that this crystal is translucent as the object-property complex ⟨this crystal, translucency⟩, but they will not regard it as any of their business to analyze the structure of the crystal itself: that is chemical structure, not conceptual structure in the relevant sense, otherwise the proposition would not be atomic. Their goal for philosophy – to analyze the structure of thought – is still only to analyze one sort of structure among many. Thus one might accept the Russellian view of propositions and still oppose the conceptual turn, on the grounds that philosophy can appropriately investigate general features of nonconceptual structure too, such as the general mereological structure of physical objects.

Alternatively, take a more standard view of concepts, as something like modes of presentation, ways of thinking or speaking, or intellectual capacities. Still, the claim that concepts constitute only a small fraction of reality might be accused of violating Dummett's second tenet by confusing thought with the process of thinking. Almost everyone agrees that psychological events constitute only a small fraction of reality, but that is not yet to concede that thought in a non-psychologistic sense is similarly confined. John McDowell (1994: 27), for instance, argues:³

[T]here is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the

³ Although McDowell is sometimes classified as a "post-analytic" philosopher, he finds his own way to accept Dummett's "fundamental tenet of analytical philosophy," that "philosophical questions about thought are to be approached through language" (1994: 125).

case. So since the world is everything that is the case . . . there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world. Of course thought can be distanced from the world by being false, but there is no distance from the world implicit in the very idea of thought.

For McDowell, the sort of thing one can think is a conceptual content: the conceptual has no outer boundary beyond which lies unconceptualized reality. He denies the accusation of idealism on the grounds that he is not committed to any contentious thesis of mind-dependence.

The sort of thing that can be the case is that a certain object has a certain property. McDowell's claim is not that the object and the property *are* concepts, but merely that we can in principle form concepts *of* them, with which to think that the object has the property. Indeed, we can in principle form many different concepts of them: we can think of the same object as Hesperus or as Phosphorus. In Fregean terms congenial to McDowell, different senses determine the same reference. He admits "an alignment of minds with the realm of sense, not with the realm of reference . . . thought and reality meet in the realm of sense" (1994: 179–80). For objects, his claim that the conceptual is unbounded amounts to the claim that any object can be thought of. Likewise for the sort of thing that can be the case: the claim is, for example, that whenever an object has a property, it can be thought, of the object and the property, that the former has the latter. But, on a coherent and natural reading of "the sort of thing that can be the case," such things are individuated coarsely, by the objects, properties, and relations that they involve. Thus, since Hesperus *is* Phosphorus, what is the case if Hesperus is bright *is* what is the case if Phosphorus is bright: the objects are the same, as are the properties. On this reading, McDowell's claim "When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the case" is false, because what one thinks is individuated at the level of sense while what is the case is individuated at the level of reference. Although McDowell's claim is true on weaker readings, they will not bear the weight his argument puts on them.

McDowell's argument in any case seems to require the premise that everything (object, property, relation, state of affairs, . . .) is thinkable. That premise is highly contentious. What reason have we to assume that reality does not contain *elusive objects*, incapable in

principle of being individually thought of? Although we can think of them collectively – for example, as elusive objects – that is not to single out any one of them in thought. Can we be sure that ordinary material objects do not consist of clouds of elusive sub-sub-atomic particles? We might know them by their collective effects while unable to think of any single one of them. The general question whether there can be elusive objects looks like a good candidate for philosophical consideration. Of course, McDowell does not intend the conceptual to be limited by the merely medical limitations of human beings, but the elusiveness may run deeper than that: the nature of the objects may preclude the kind of separable causal interaction with complex beings that isolating them in thought would require. In Fregean terminology again, a sense is a mode of presentation of a referent; a mode of presentation of something is a way of presenting it to a possible thinker, if not an actual one; for all McDowell has shown, there may be necessary limitations on thinking.⁴ Although elusive objects belong to the same very general ontological category of objects as those we can single out, their possibility still undermines McDowell's claim that we cannot make "interesting sense" of the idea of something outside the conceptual realm (1994: 105–6). We do not know whether there actually are elusive objects. What would motivate the claim that there are none, if not some form of idealism very far from McDowell's intentions? We should adopt no conception of philosophy that on methodological grounds excludes elusive objects.⁵

Suppose, just for the sake of argument, that there are no elusive objects. That by itself would still not vindicate a restriction of philosophy to the conceptual, the realm of sense or thought. The practitioners of any discipline have thoughts and communicate them,

⁴ McDowell's invocation of humility (1994: 40) addresses contingent limitations, not necessary ones.

⁵ Mark Johnston (1993: 96–7) discusses "the Enigmas, entities essentially undetectable by us." He stipulates that they are collectively as well as individually undetectable; thus our elusive objects need not be his Enigmas. If we cannot have good evidence that there are no Enigmas, it may well be a waste of time to worry whether there are Enigmas. But it would not follow that it is a waste of time to worry whether there *can be* Enigmas. Their definition does not rule out knowledge of the possibility of such things; such knowledge may itself be philosophically useful (indeed, Johnston uses it for his philosophical purposes).

but they are rarely studying those very thoughts: rather, they are studying what their thoughts are about. Most thoughts are not about thoughts. To make philosophy the study of thought is to insist that philosophers' thoughts should be about thoughts. It is not obvious why philosophers should accept that restriction.

Even within what is usually considered analytic philosophy of mind, much work violates the two tenets of conceptual philosophy. Naturalists hold that everything is part of the natural world, and should be studied as such; many of them study thought as part of the natural world by not sharply distinguishing it from the psychological process of thinking. Those who study sensations or qualia without treating them as intentional phenomena are not usually attempting to analyze the structure of thought; their interest is primarily in the nature of the sensations or qualia themselves, not in our concepts of them. Even when the question of veridicality arises, it is not always conceded that there are structured thoughts: some philosophers claim that perception has a conceptually unstructured content that represents the environment as being a certain way. Their interest is in the nature of the nonconceptual content itself, not just in our concept of it.

Despite early hopes or fears, philosophy of mind has not come to play the organizing role in philosophy that philosophy of language once did. No single branch of philosophy does: philosophy is no more immune than other disciplines to increasing specialization. Nor is any one philosophical method currently treated as a panacea for philosophical ills, with consequent privileges for its home branch. Once we consider other branches of philosophy, we notice much more philosophizing whose primary subject matter is not conceptual.

Biology and physics are not studies of thought. In their most theoretical reaches, they merge into the philosophy of biology and the philosophy of physics. Why then should philosophers of biology and philosophers of physics study only thought? Although they sometimes study what biologists' and physicists' concepts are or should be, sometimes they study what those concepts are concepts of, in an abstract and general manner. If the conceptual turn is incompatible with regarding such activities as legitimately philosophical, why take the conceptual turn?

There is a more central example. Much contemporary metaphysics is not primarily concerned with thought or language at all. Its goal

is to discover what fundamental kinds of things there are and what properties and relations they have, not to study the structure of our thought about them – perhaps we have no thought about them until it is initiated by metaphysicians. Contemporary metaphysics studies substances and essences, universals and particulars, space and time, possibility and necessity. Although nominalist or conceptualist reductions of all these matters have been attempted, such theories have no methodological priority and generally turn out to do scant justice to what they attempt to reduce.

The usual stories about the history of twentieth-century philosophy fail to fit much of the liveliest, exactest, and most creative achievements of the final third of that century: the revival of metaphysical theorizing, realist in spirit, often speculative, sometimes commonsensical, associated with Saul Kripke, David Lewis, Kit Fine, Peter van Inwagen, David Armstrong and many others: work that has, to cite just one example, made it anachronistic to dismiss essentialism as anachronistic.⁶ On the traditional grand narrative schemes in the history of philosophy, this activity must be a throwback to pre-Kantian metaphysics: it ought not to be happening – but it is. Many of those who practice it happily acknowledge its continuity with traditional metaphysics; appeals to the authority of Kant, or Wittgenstein, or history, ring hollow, for they are unbacked by any argument that has withstood the test of recent time.

One might try to see in contemporary metaphysics a Quinean breakdown of divisions between philosophy and the natural sciences. But if it is metaphysics naturalized, then so is the metaphysics of Aristotle, Descartes, and Leibniz. Armchair argument retains a central role, as do the modal notions of metaphysical possibility and necessity. Although empirical knowledge constrains the attribution of essential properties, results are more often reached through a subtle interplay of logic and the imagination. The crucial experiments are thought experiments.

Might the contrast between the new-old metaphysics and the conceptual turn be less stark than it appears to be? Contemporary metaphysicians firmly resist attempts to reconstrue their enterprise as

⁶ On essentialism see, for example, Kripke (1980), French, Uehling, and Wettstein (1986), Fine (1994, 1995) and Wiggins (2001). For a good statement of the outlook of contemporary metaphysics see Zimmerman (2004).

the analysis of thought – unlike Sir Peter Strawson, who defined his “descriptive metaphysics” as “content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world” (1959: 9). But can one reflect on concepts without reflecting on reality itself? For the aboutness of thought and talk is their very point. This idea has been emphasized by David Wiggins, Dummett’s successor and my predecessor in the Wykeham Chair, and author of some of the most distinguished essentialist metaphysics, in which considerations of logic and biology harmoniously combine. Wiggins (2001: 12) writes: “Let us forget once and for all the very idea of some knowledge of language or meaning that is not knowledge of the world itself.”

Wiggins is not just stating the obvious, that language and meaning are part of the world because everything is part of the world. Rather, his point is that in defining words – natural kind terms, for instance – we must point at real specimens. What there is determines what there is for us to mean. In knowing what we mean, we know something about what there is. That prompts the question how far the analysis of thought or language can be pursued autonomously with any kind of methodological priority.

Dummett claimed not that the traditional questions of metaphysics cannot be answered but that the way to answer them is by the analysis of thought and language. For example, in order to determine whether there are numbers, one must determine whether number words such as “7” function semantically like proper names in the context of sentences uttered in mathematical discourse. But what is it so to function? Although devil words such as “Satan” appear to function semantically like proper names in the context of sentences uttered in devil-worshipping discourse, one should not jump to the conclusion that there are devils. However enthusiastically devil-worshippers use “Satan” as though it referred to something, that does not make it refer to something. Although empty names *appear* to function semantically like referring names in the context of sentences uttered by those who believe the names to refer, the appearances are deceptive. “Satan” refers to something if and only if some sentence with “Satan” in subject position (such as “Satan is self-identical”) expresses a truth, but the analysis of thought and language is not the best way to discover whether any such sentence does indeed express a truth. Of course, what goes for “Satan” may not go for “7.” According to some neo-logicians, “7 exists” is an analytic truth (what

Ayer might have called a formal consequence of definitions), which “Satan exists” does not even purport to be. Such a claim needs the backing of an appropriate theory of analyticity.

After this preliminary sketch, it is time to get down to detailed work. The next three chapters examine different forms of the linguistic or conceptual turn. Chapter 2 uses a case study to consider in a microcosm the idea that philosophers’ questions are implicitly about language or thought when they are not explicitly so. Chapters 3 and 4 assess a wide range of versions of the idea that the armchair methodology of philosophy is grounded in the analytic or conceptual status of a core of philosophical truths, which need not be *about* language or thought, even implicitly. In each case the upshot is negative. Although philosophers have more reason than physicists to consider matters of language or thought, philosophy is in no deep sense a linguistic or conceptual inquiry, any more than physics is. But it does not follow that experiment is an appropriate primary method for philosophy. Similar arguments suggest that mathematics is in no deep sense a linguistic or conceptual inquiry, yet experiment is not an appropriate primary method for mathematics. The second half of the book develops an alternative conception of philosophy, on which a largely armchair methodology remains defensible, as it does for mathematics.

From this perspective and that of many contemporary philosophers, the conceptual turn and *a fortiori* the linguistic turn look like wrong turnings. It is pointless to deny that such philosophers are “analytic,” for that term is customarily applied to a broad, loose tradition held together by an intricate network of causal ties of influence and communication, not by shared essential properties of doctrine or method: what do Frege, Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein, Carnap, Ayer, Quine, Austin, Strawson, Davidson, Rawls, Williams, Anscombe, Geach, Armstrong, Smart, Fodor, Dummett, Wiggins, Marcus, Hintikka, Kaplan, Lewis, Kripke, Fine, van Inwagen and Stalnaker all have in common to distinguish them from all the non-analytic philosophers? Many who regard the linguistic and conceptual turns as serious mistakes have ties of influence and communication that put them squarely within that tradition. “Analytic philosophy” is a phrase in a living language; the attempt to stipulate a sense for it that excludes many of the philosophers just listed will achieve nothing but brief terminological confusion.

Historians of philosophy on the grand scale may be too Whiggish or Hegelian to regard the linguistic or conceptual turn as merely a false turning from which philosophy is withdrawing now that it recognizes its mistake. We are supposed to go forward from it, not back. At the very least, we should learn from our mistakes, if only not to repeat them. But if the conceptual turn was a mistake, it was not a simple blunder; it went too deep for that. A new narrative structure is needed for the history of philosophy since 1960; it is clear only in the roughest outline what it should be.