

Chapter Nine

Language and a Clear View

**First, words are our tools, and as a minimum,
we should use clean tools: we should know
what we mean and what
we do not, and we must forearm ourselves
against the traps that language sets us.**

John L. Austin

1. Language. In Chapter Eight we surveyed some of the techniques we use to promote the traits and behavior we prefer. Any of the techniques mentioned might impress our decider and lead us to change our ways, but when that happens it is a good bet that language was involved. Language conveys information that is relevant to our choices and it is used to express commands, demands, and reprimands. Threats are intensified by the ability to describe undesirable situations, and no consequence can be predicted unless it can first be described. Words make possible our belief in gods and in morality, and without them we would have an impoverished version of our place in the natural world, and no social life to speak of.

Linguistic philosophers and philosophers of language have taught us how marvelous and powerful language is, and also how easy it is to get things wrong when we are careless with our words and mistaken about how they work. Ludwig Wittgenstein went so far as to say that philosophy is “a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.” (Wittgenstein [1], I ¶109)

The naïve idea that a word is meaningful only if it “denotes” something led G. E. Moore to write that if ‘good’ doesn’t denote something simple, it either denotes something complex, or else “means nothing at all, and there is no such subject as Ethics.” (Moore, 15) Other philosophers, also misled by simplistic accounts of meaning, set out to discover what “meanings” are. A slate of traditional candidates (objects, ideas, concepts, classes, thoughts, propositions, properties) was brought forth, but none of them won the votes of a majority of philosophers of language. Wittgenstein, who had helped philosophers get into this quandary, pointed the way out. He advised us to turn our attention from questions about meaning and meanings to questions about use. “A main source of our failure to understand,” he said, “is that we do not command a clear view of the use of our words.” (Wittgenstein [1], ¶122)

The positive contribution of language to our life is undeniable, but the negative effects of toxic concepts, careless speech, double-talk, and lies can range from the absurd to the tragic. If we understand the ways language can be exploited, and pay close attention to what is being said, we can avoid many misunderstandings and protect ourselves from those who hope to trick us with rhetoric and sophistry. This hopeful view is shared by some of the students of language we are about to consider, and especially by those who have attempted to help us develop that “clear view of the use of our words” that will make it possible for us to forearm ourselves against some of those traps Austin mentioned.

Jacob Bronowski said that because we have language “we have built a world of outside objects, a world which does not exist for animals.” (Bronowski, 38)

Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin agreed, and added that “it makes good biological sense to see language as a rather useful by-product of an ever sharpening pressure to understand and manipulate the components of the environment.” Because we use names and form concepts, they said, we create “a more sharply delineated world” inside our heads. (Leakey and Lewin [1], 204) With language we can preserve lessons from the past, make plans about the future, and fix past, present and future in a comprehensible story. With language we can clarify, transmit, and promote rules, and we can find out what other people think.

The effect of language on the way we navigate the social world may be even more profound than its effect on the way we navigate the physical one. The problems of finding food and shelter are simple compared to the difficulties we encounter trying to deal with other people, and with their attempts to deal with us. We needed a keener consciousness, a linguistic consciousness, Lewin suggested, “so that we could understand—and perhaps manipulate—others better.” (Lewin, 174)

Our use of language to structure reality and to communicate and manipulate relies to a surprising extent on implication, metaphor, and other non-literal devices. In their book *Metaphors we Live By*, the linguist George Lakoff and the philosopher Mark Johnson have written at length about the role of metaphors in our perception of, interaction with, and thought about, the world. Metaphors are not mere matters of style and decoration, rather “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.” (Lakoff and Johnson [1], 3) Metaphors form systems that enable us to comprehend one thing in terms of

another. In this way we emphasize some features of a thing and obscure others. If we “live by” the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR, we will argue differently from someone who favors ARGUMENT IS CONVERSATION, or ARGUMENT IS DANCE. The ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor gives rise to countless ordinary expressions:

Your claims are *indefensible*.

He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.

His criticisms were *right on target*.

I *demolished* his argument.

I’ve never *won* an argument with him.

You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*

If you use that *strategy*, he’ll *wipe you out*.

He *shot down* all of my arguments. (Lakoff and Johnson [1], 4)

After considering a variety of metaphorical systems, Lakoff and Johnson conclude that “in all aspects of life, not just in politics or in love, we define our reality in terms of metaphor, and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphor.” (Lakoff and Johnson [2], 322)

Consider the metaphor of bondage so popular with moralists, who seem to believe that moral principles exert an objective but surmountable force, a “moral gravity” pulling everyone in the right direction. Many other metaphors serve the moralist cause—morality as a guide, a quest, a set of laws, a compass; or a “good will” as something that, “like a jewel, shines by its own light.” Thinking of value as a “substance” or a “property” easily leads to thinking of it as present in things, as quantifiable, objective, and detectable. This objectification of value was at the heart

of Moore's intuitionism, and it stares at us from his remark, just quoted, that if 'good' does not denote something, then it is a meaningless term.

The news about language is mixed. Words and concepts help us make sense of what is happening, but they also lead us to ignore or distort characteristics of the people, things, and events we use them to describe. If we think of someone as good, bad, busy, angry, evil, or dumb, we will expect a certain kind of behavior, and we may see it even when it isn't there. Our projections can create new evidence for our categorizations even as our categorizations govern our projections. As a result, we overlook complexity and change, and seeing only what we expect to see, we respond in inappropriate, self-defeating, or disastrous ways.

And there is more: words and concepts make explanations possible, which is great, but at the same time they make it easy to generate absurdly simple explanations for complex events:

He is angry with me because I didn't come to his party.

She quit her job and moved to Montana because she loved him.

He became a terrorist because he wanted to go to Heaven.

They voted for him because they are old.

These and similar simple explanations may single out one relevant factors in a more complicated story, but they are often wrong and always far too simple. Even when they are not completely mistaken, they tempt us to stop asking questions long before we have learned what we need to know.

The more closely we look at our simple explanations, and at the vague and loaded concepts we use in constructing them, the clearer it becomes that language is not an infallible instrument for making sense of the world. It may create “a more sharply delineated world inside our heads,” but it also makes it easy for us to neglect important details, and to be satisfied with generalizations, easy answers, stereotypes, and slogans. If we are not careful, we will become victims of this “useful tool,” befuddled and manipulated by words and by those who use them to control what we feel, think, and do.

But does this mean that we should stop verbalizing our reality and abandon words and explanations? Incredibly enough, this seems to be the advice of the Ninth Century Chinese Chan (Zen) Master Huangbo:

Let there be a silent understanding and no more. Away
with all thinking and explaining. (Blofeld [1], 34)

Do not deceive yourselves with conceptual thinking,
and do not look anywhere for the truth, for all that
is needed is to refrain from allowing concepts
to arise. (Blofeld [1], 75)

Huangbo urged us to work for a silent understanding because he knew that words can blind us to what is before our eyes, or bind us to our habitual roles and responses. This is true, but any “silent understanding” a fluent speaker manages to attain will flow from a comprehensive appreciation of a world that has already been structured by language. Our silent understanding will not take place in ignorance of

what can be said. What, then, is it to “refrain from allowing concepts to arise?” And what are concepts? Without getting lost in the philosophy of language, we can say that when we master a concept we master the use of a network of related words. Huangbo is certainly not telling us to destroy our concepts, or to forget how to use the related words, not even the moralist’s favorite ones, because we still need to be able to understand what others are saying and to speak with them. So what *is* he telling us?

We can put this question to his student, Huihai, who also promoted the idea of a silent understanding. He said that “right thinking” occurs when we are not thinking in terms of good and evil, sorrow and joy, beginning and end, acceptance and rejection, likes and dislikes, aversion and love. Right thinking, he said, means letting your understanding of a situation develop without short-circuiting your intelligence by immediately resorting to overused, simplistic, and confused concepts.

You should know that setting forth the principle of deliverance in its entirety amounts only to this—WHEN THINGS HAPPEN, MAKE NO RESPONSE: keep your minds from dwelling on anything whatsoever: keep them for ever still as the void and utterly pure (without stain): and thereby spontaneously attain deliverance. (Blofeld, 94)

When someone offers you “the principle of deliverance in its entirety,” it may pay to lend an ear. The advice to “make no response” when “things happen” is not advice to stand motionless as if we were a statue or to enter a mystical state of

coma-like unconsciousness. Remember that for the Daoist, *wu-wei* (non-action) was not about immobility, it was about spontaneous action (or non-action) unmediated by conscious and word-bound deliberation. This is also what Huihai and his teacher were talking about. They were telling us not to make a string of words our first response to everything that happens, but to keep a quiet and steady mind and to restrict both the verbal and emotional static that we ourselves generate. To “make no response” is to refrain from categorizing, emoting, and judging. It is to give ourselves the microseconds we need to determine what is “really” going on. The undistorted data that can be gathered (wordlessly and unconsciously) in this episode of quiet attention is the best present we could give our decider, and our gift will be rewarded with a harvest of sensible decisions.

2. Cleaning our tools. What are some of the features and uses of language that can result in confusion and exploitation, and how can we protect ourselves? Most of our words are vague, or ambiguous, or both. Usually the context clears things up, but not always, and not if one party is being devious, or if both of them are. Other errors result from the fact that almost any word can be encumbered by positive or negative connotations. This means that we can be directed away from decisions that would be good for us if key words have been successfully smeared with negative associations. A different category of problem arises from our uses of language to oversimplify, blame, and fret. As it turns out, there are quite a few things we need to learn not to say to ourselves or to others.

(1) Vagueness. Though we usually have no trouble with them, even stolid words like ‘book’ and ‘chair’ are vague in that they shade off gradually into

magazines, journals, couches and stools. Vague words have borderline cases or fuzzy boundaries. Words like 'happy', or 'tired', or 'love' do not have (and can not be given) precise boundaries, and one's use or interpretation of any of them on an occasion will depend on too many things to list. The vagueness of the word 'person', for example, undermines the viability of debates about abortion and stem-cell research. Where is the dividing line between beings that are persons and beings that are not? There is none. The question of when a fertilized human ovum becomes a "person" is not an empirical question, a question about biology, or a linguistic question that calls for a dictionary definition. It is, for most "persons," a question of rhetoric: "Given my views about abortion or stem-cell research, how must I understand the word 'person' if I want to support my position?" We will never reach agreement about the morality of abortion by arriving at some consensus about how to interpret the word 'person', because our beliefs about the meaning of that word will defer to our more intense beliefs about our moral obligations (or the lack of them) to the unborn.

Sometimes the effort to help the poor can be derailed by the vagueness of words like 'poor', 'hungry', or 'needy'. The "stingy" might argue for a (re)definition of 'poverty' that leaves out many of the poor, but this would only be a semantic sideshow aimed at rationalizing their own lack of charity. The real-world problem (for a person, a group, or a nation) is neither to determine that there is a moral duty to the poor, nor to come up with some crisp distinction between those who are poor and those who are not, but to *decide* whether to give, how much to give, and who shall we benefit with our charity. Generosity, inspired by empathy and compassion,

will always take us further than morality, which can never demand as much as people seem to need. When it comes to helping others, it is easy to tell when someone needs help, but quite a bit more difficult, and if the amoralist is right it is impossible, to prove that someone *deserves* helped, or that we are morally obliged to supply it.

(2) Ambiguity. Words are ambiguous when they have two or more meanings. A familiar example is the word 'bank'. When the context fails to clear things up, we can ask whether someone means the river bank or The First National. Opponents in an argument about morality frequently (by design or by accident) mean completely different things by 'good' or 'right', or 'a right'. Do we have a right to health care? Our understanding of this question and our answer to it will depend on whether we are talking about a moral, universal, constitutional, legal, inalienable, god-given, natural, positive, or negative right. Our answer to the question will also depend on what is meant by 'health', 'care', 'have' and 'we'.

Natural ambiguity is trouble enough, but, because of their passion for definitions, philosophers have muddied the waters by minting a milling gaggle of new ones. Recall how Smith argued that moral wrongness is not "queer" (in the way Mackie thought it was) if it is "defined" in terms of what some group of people want to forbid. And if pigs are defined as robins, then pigs can fly.

There are so many interpretations of our controversial words that it is really a good idea to keep a lookout for any attempt to "strengthen" some position or argument by giving special meanings to common words. Suppose the topic is God. God knows what anyone really means by 'god', but if we are discussing religion we

had better ask. Is God conscious, capable of human emotions, omniscient, and all the rest? Or is God something more abstract like “love” or “a higher power.” If you think of God as a “force,” like gravity or love, there is no need for an atheist to take issue with your belief in “God.” It is important to understand this because two people can’t even *communicate* about their religious beliefs without either agreeing on what they mean by the word ‘god’, or at least discovering what each other means by that word. Many of those who discuss or write about religion or morality just set off talking or writing without the slightest idea whether or not anyone understands them. Serious communicators will be aware of what their audience might think they mean by the words they use, and so they will be careful to avoid ambiguities that could lead to confusion.

(3) Emotive meaning. In *Ethics and Language*, C. L. Stevenson introduced a distinction between “descriptive meaning” and “emotive meaning.” He characterized the descriptive meaning of a word as its “disposition to affect cognition,” and its emotive meaning in terms of its use to express emotions and to influence the attitudes and emotions of others. We often do feel strong emotions when we argue, but Stevenson was concerned with the emotive language itself, not the temper of its users. Words develop, and sometimes lose, the power to influence the ways people feel about things, and it is this power to move us that makes them such valuable prizes in the meaning-wars.

When the word ‘liberal’, which is both vague and ambiguous, is used to describe someone, it can be meant positively, negatively, or neutrally. For many people the term is completely pejorative, but this was not always so. Among

socialists, 'socialism' has a positive emotive meaning, but not among capitalists. The same person or thing can be called by many names and phrases, some positive and some negative. Is he a jihadi or a terrorist? Is it love or infatuation? Is it a "single payer health care system" or "socialized medicine?" Bertrand Russell wrote somewhere of the "conjugation of adjectives," an example of which is: "I am firm. You are stubborn. He is a pig headed fool." Another is: "I am flexible. You keep changing your mind. He is a flip-flopper."

Vagueness, ambiguity, and the emotional power of words have always been used to evade criticism, cloud issues, win arguments, and manipulate others. Those who fail to see through these tricks can be so dazzled by the rhetoric that they end up giving away the store, or sacrificing everything for nothing. So let us strive to know what is meant by the words streaming out of our mouths, or into our ears.

(4) Grumbling and Muttering. Language can indeed function as a tool to influence and manipulate others, but it also functions internally, when we "say things to ourselves," or narrate our way through our day. This is usually benign, but if we make a practice of mentally rehearsing our grievances, we might eventually start believing our own one-sided and bitter versions of events. The *Dhammapada*, an early Buddhist book on ethics, urges us to avoid thoughts like: "They insulted me; they hurt me; they defeated me; they cheated me" because such thoughts foster hatred and further our own suffering. If they get out of control, we end up muttering to ourselves on the streets and subways, which is a pretty clear sign of the intensity of the suffering we are putting ourselves through.

The very same advice shows up in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*. "Put from you the belief that 'I have been wronged', and with it will go the feeling. Reject your sense of injury, and the injury itself disappears." (4:7) This is not, of course, literally true, but what almost certainly *will* disappear is that additional part of the injury that is self-inflicted.

These ill-humored thoughts, repeated obsessively, nurture our grudges and can dominate our decider. Other more nuanced thoughts and observations have no way to gain a hearing, and the result is often suffering for all concerned. Therapy, drugs, or even some interesting new hobby may help shut down the muttering because, after all, the simple but not easy solution to the problem is to divert our attention to other channels.

(5) Catastrophizing. Another form of suffering that language enables, and that Marcus Aurelius also mentioned, results from worry about all the ways things could turn out badly. If we could not resort to words we could not dwell on any of our "worst case scenarios." Here is what Marcus told himself about that:

Never go beyond the sense of your original impressions. They tell you that such-and-such a person is speaking ill of you; that was their message; they did not go on to say it has done you any harm. I see my child is ill; my eyes tell me that, but they do not suggest that his life is in danger. Always, then, keep to the original impressions; supply no additions of your own, and you are safe. (MA, 132)

When he wrote of keeping to the “the original impressions” Marcus may have come up with a Stoic version of Huihai’s advice, which was, “when things happen, make no response.” This is the kind of thing we can all manage to do (at least to some extent) if we work at it. Marcus had a number of maxims about this and would administer a kind of cognitive therapy to himself when he felt it was necessary. We all have our own slogans and favorite thoughts that can sometimes help us abort our fretting if we can just remember to resort to them in the middle of a fret. It is better, however, to reflect on the uselessness of these painful fantasies before the occasions for them arise, and then, if we are alert, sometimes they can be headed off.

3. Search for the Cure. Much confusion results from our self-serving and manipulative ways of using words and from our ill-advised tendency to avoid thinking about our use of language. Words like ‘conservative’, ‘liberal’, ‘life’, ‘death’, ‘suffering’, and ‘freedom’ are vague, ambiguous, and typically used with a variety of positive and negative connotations. Those who exploit them to make a point or win an argument are, naturally, reluctant to discuss questions of “proper usage.” They have no interest in clearing up ambiguities, or even in saying what they mean, unless they can win a point by doing so. They need no referees because they thrive by bending the rules, and they have no interest in healing those who have been led into confusion and submission by their clever linguistic ploys. Fortunately, other students of language have stepped in to call fouls, and to help us understand how the game is played.

Sextus Empiricus, the Buddha himself, and many Buddhist philosophers would all agree with the mature Wittgenstein that “the philosopher’s treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness.” (¶255) Sextus actually *was* a physician, and the followers of the Buddha called him “the great physician” and said that he had discovered a cure for suffering. The popularity of this medical metaphor is easy to understand. We can be infected by a slogan, a question, an answer, or a dogma; we can transmit that infection to others; and fortunate survivors can build up an immunity to similar strains of the disease. Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett develop this idea in their writings about memes. (The concept of a meme is presented by Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene*, and most recently discussed in his book, *The God Delusion*. It is further developed by Dennett in *Breaking the Spell*.)

Reasonable linguistic hygiene can protect us from many of the misunderstandings that involve vagueness and ambiguity, and extra diligence can alert us to the use of emotive language to influence us. We can also learn not to grumble or obsess about future dangers—but even all that may not protect us from those “traps that language sets us.”

There is a set of problems we would not have if we did not have language, or if we understood it better than we do. We have learned much by asking questions, but we have not learned to take “no answer” as an answer. Our generous assumption that any question that can be formulated deserves an answer has led us to waste much time and thought on red herrings and superstitious fantasies. By taking the standard “ultimate questions” seriously, we have condemned generations of scholars to lifetimes of clever but ultimately futile deliberation. We ask what

happens after we die, and whether there is some purpose to so much suffering. We want to know why there is something rather than nothing, or what our role in the “big picture” is supposed to be. Moralists want to discover the nature of true goodness, or to find some rule that will clarify the distinction between right and wrong. Metaphysicians claim to be in pursuit of an understanding of “Being Itself.” Perhaps what we should be asking is why we torture ourselves with these discredited classical conundrums. The answer to *that* question may charge our dogged perseverance to some combination of fear and arrogance. We fear the unknown and we are arrogant enough to suppose that we can find an answer to any question that can be asked.

If we want to free ourselves from these traditional but hopeless questions and from the self-serving and fantastic answers advanced by priests, philosophers, and profiteers, then we need to find some way to let these “philosophical questions” go. This may be what Wittgenstein was talking about when he said that his aim was to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle, and added that “The discovery I am looking for is the one that will enable me to stop doing philosophy” (I ¶133). As it happened, Sextus Empiricus, the best known of the Greek Skeptics, may have seen himself as having made that very discovery.

(1) Sextus Empiricus. Sextus is famous for having walked away from the standard questions of the philosophers. He said that no one “disputes that the underlying object has this or that appearance; the point in dispute is whether the object is in reality as it appears to be.” (I, 22) This “point in dispute” is the exact kind of metaphysical question he decided to abandon. By putting aside questions like “Is

untasted honey really sweet?" (which apparently had caused him some anxiety), he found that "there followed, by chance, mental tranquility in matters of opinion." But apparently it is not easy to turn our backs on problems that have puzzled us for years and baffled philosophers for centuries. Sextus needed to come up with some thought or insight to dampen his metaphysical curiosity, but it had to be something other than the self-defeating claim that we can have no knowledge about the reality behind appearances. That position had already been taken by the Academic Skeptics, and had been criticized by Sextus himself for being hopelessly dogmatic.

What Sextus claimed to have finally understood was that any dogmatic claim to know how things really are can be treated with a cocktail of several standard skeptical arguments based on our all too human tendency to get things wrong. What we think, and think we see, can be distorted by our mental or physical condition, by the lighting, or even by our cultural expectations. And, he added, "many lovers who have ugly mistresses think them most beautiful." Like the physician he was, he kept a supply of these skeptical arguments (or "tropes") ready to be administered at the first symptoms of an episode of dogmatism. In his "tenth trope" which, unlike the others, was based on variations in customs and morality rather than on variations in perceptions, Sextus used a version of an argument we have already rejected when it was called "The Argument from Disagreement." He argued that there is so much disagreement in morality, customs, conduct, and laws, "we shall not be able to state" which of the laws and customs are the truly correct ones, or which things are good or evil by nature.

In Chapter Two we saw Sextus claiming that someone “who entertains the opinion that anything is by nature good or bad is continually disturbed,” and that when a person suspends that opinion the disturbance disappears. He did not suspend his belief in objective value as a *means* of attaining quietude—the quietude came about “by chance,” as a byproduct of the suspension. What enabled him to abandon his moral and metaphysical curiosity was that when he considered the arguments on both sides of some dispute about whether “things are in reality as they appear to be,” he “found himself involved in contradictions of equal weight, and being unable to decide between them suspended judgment.”

I fear that this suspension is a bit premature for a skeptic. The *suspicion* that there will always be equally weighty arguments on both sides of any argument about how things are in themselves is not enough to allow a dedicated skeptic to withdraw from the field, and the *belief* that the two sides will always be equally balanced is both dogmatic (and hence unavailable to Sextus) and extremely unlikely.

Sextus was right to doubt the moralist’s ability to defend the opinion that things are by nature good or evil, but since he was unwilling to subscribe to the dogmatic view of moral anti-realism, he adopted and recommended a “fictionalist” policy of conforming to tradition, “whereby we regard piety in the conduct of life as good, but impiety as evil.” The dangers of this policy become immediately evident when we reflect on the ambiguity of the word ‘piety’, and on the popular belief that evil-doers ought to be punished. It is one thing to go along with our standard words for ordinary things, but when we come to words like

'good' and 'evil', or words with a heavy negative charge (like 'traitor' or 'tyrant' or 'terrorist'), linguistic compliance is not without consequences.

If we have any common sense or independence of thought we will find much in our traditional moral language, beliefs, and behavior to criticize. Sextus must have realized that some of the metaphysical and moral beliefs of his fellows were clearly ridiculous, but his official skeptical stance would not allow him to express even this reasonable bit of dogmatism. He wanted to speak with the moralists, but to feel the freedom from moral bondage and the genuine quietude that is only available to someone who believes (dogmatically) that nothing is good or evil by nature. This liberating belief, however, is not something we can choose to adopt or suspend. Once it comes upon us, it requires a serious act of repression to regain our ignorance.

It is unlikely that anyone can remain as relentlessly undecided as a dedicated skeptic must. If my remarks in Chapter Eight about our decider are on target, then we have to admit that the metaphor used by Sextus, DELIBERATING IS WEIGHING, is based on a false picture of how we actually arrive at moral beliefs and decisions. We speak of weighty arguments and of balancing opposing considerations, and we often claim that the cost of some act or policy will outweigh its benefits, or vice versa. But weighing considerations is unlike weighing cucumbers, and in any case, all the scales are fixed. We learned in Chapter Eight that the genesis of a decision is, like the genesis of everything else, an inscrutably complicated function of causes and conditions. Arguments that are based on moral beliefs may be in the mix, but when we are unable to agree with someone who has

different values, it is usually not because there are equally good reasons on both sides, it is because we are equally stubborn, equally dogmatic, equally talented, and willing to keep talking until someone sends us home.

Sextus was troubled about questions about the relation between the way things appeared and the way they were in reality. But he understood the futility of arguing about that, and he sought a way to let go of these questions once and for all. To do this, however, he needed to make some dogmatic assumptions to which he, as a skeptic, was not entitled. His instincts were good, but his aversion to dogmatism kept him from affirming moral anti-realism, and he seems to have combined a justified suspicion of moral objectivity with an ill-considered form of moral fictionalism.

(2) Ludwig Wittgenstein. Like Sextus, Ludwig Wittgenstein was also in the business of providing cures for various kinds of dogmatism and confusion. Some philosophers who were influenced by Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (published after his death in 1951) came to be called "therapeutic positivists." They were called *positivists* because they did not concern themselves with the metaphysical or the supernatural, and they were called *therapeutic* because their goal was not to solve philosophical problems but to eliminate them by treating them as symptoms of an underlying illness. This illness was diagnosed as a deep confusion about language.

Wittgenstein said that he was aiming for "*complete* clarity," but, he added, "this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear." (PI, I, ¶133) The metaphors at work here are: PHILOSOPHY IS THERAPY and

PHILOSOPHY IS DISEASE. The philosopher (as therapist) cures the philosopher (as patient) from philosophy (the disease). We suffer from the disease when we are consumed by some stupid question that only exists because of some quirk of language. To be cured is to see through the quirk in a way that enables us to abandon the question.

Even in his youthful *Tractatus* Wittgenstein was aiming at complete clarity and the elimination of philosophical problems. The clarity was to be attained by “translating” ordinary sentences into ideal ones, whose structure shows exactly how they are related to reality. Maddening details aside, we get clarity by reforming our ordinary imprecise language, or replacing it with an “ideal” one in which “philosophical” claims can’t even be asserted. The ideal method in philosophy, he said, would be to show anyone who wanted to say something metaphysical “that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions.” (TLP, 6.53) For Wittgenstein, “metaphysics” included religion, morality, and aesthetics. He said that morality (which he referred to as “Ethics”) “cannot be put into words” (6.421). At times he seems almost ready to subscribe to moral anti-realism, as when he wrote that talk about “absolute value” is “nonsense.” The problem is that when he referred to talk about absolute value, he probably wanted to include the denial, as well as the assertion, that there is such a thing. That would certainly link him with Sextus, who was also unwilling to commit to moral anti-realism.

When we say things about ethics (or religion), Wittgenstein said in his 1929 “Lecture on Ethics,” we try to “go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language.” He added that the tendency of anyone who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or religion was to run up against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it. (Lecture on Ethics)

Obviously Wittgenstein would not have appreciated the virtues of moral abolitionism, or the attempt to promote it. Perhaps he considered a belief in (or at least a fascination with) ultimate meaning and absolute good to be useful and ennobling. But why did he, of all people, not see the trouble this “tendency of the human mind” can get us into?

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein still identified language as both the problem and the solution. But he came to think that the clear view we need can be attained not by replacing our ordinary imprecise language with an improved one, as he had once believed, but by paying close attention to the one we actually speak. Because we do not often think about our natural and spontaneous uses of

language, we fail to notice when someone stretches a word, shifts a meaning, or loads a phrase with value where none existed before. “Who made it?” is usually a reasonable question when applied to human artifacts, but we need to think twice when someone extends the question to natural objects, the earth, and even the universe. “Why are you here?” is a sensible question when asked of a person who has joined you, but not when it is meant as “Why do you exist at all?” If we continue to tolerate (and even respect) talk we do not understand, and questions no one could answer, then before long we will find that we have been talked into bafflement, and buried under questions we were too inattentive to ignore. We are like lobsters in a pot, and before we realize it we are in hot philosophical water, and being burned by unanswerable questions about Reality, God, other minds, ultimate meaning, natural rights, and intrinsic value.

Wittgenstein’s mature insights about language apply across the board, but his attention was fixed on *philosophical* problems involving language and thought, and on correcting his earlier mistakes about language. Starting with Plato, thousands of philosopher-hours have been expended trying to figure out what is common to things we call by the same name. Almost everyone had an answer, but Wittgenstein rejected the question—or answered it by saying “Quite often, nothing at all.” He claimed that we call things by the same name, not because they share an essence or a property or a feature, but because they are similar in ways that matter to us.

One of Wittgenstein's most important examples of this is the concept of language itself. He insisted that the activities we see as language have no one "thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all 'language'." (I, 65) The same can be said about "the proceedings we call 'games'." (I, 66) After listing many kinds of game, he asked what is common to them, and then admonished us not to think they all have something in common, "or they would not be called 'games'." Don't think, he said, but look. "For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all." (I, 66-67) Games are like members of a family—they share what he called "family resemblances." This means that rather than searching for the essence of *goodness*, or trying to guess what *meanings* are, we need to study the uses of the words 'good' and 'meaning'—not the uses (and misuses) of philosophers trying to impose their idiosyncratic definitions on us, but the wide range of familiar and intricately related everyday uses. In Wittgenstein's famous words:

When philosophers use a word—"knowledge", "being", "object", "I", "proposition", "name"—and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?—What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use." (PI, I,116)

Wittgenstein's "therapy" has actually cured a good number of philosophers, but it has also infuriated others who have no wish to have their definitions disputed and their questions dissolved. But he has taught many of us to appreciate the organic flexibility of language and to free ourselves from old ways of looking at things. In the end, however, he may, like Sextus, have been a bit too trusting of conventional moral language, and a bit too inclined to lapse into the language of morality. He never did come out as a moral anti-realist and certainly would not have recommended abolishing morality. His life and his intense self-disapproval suggest that he might have been infected by some stern form of moralism so early and so deeply that he was unable to escape from its bondage. The result is that, like Sextus, he may have given our ordinary conventional moral beliefs and ways of talking a free pass. Many of the dumb things we say and do have nothing to do with philosophical questions, and actually stem from our ordinary ways of thinking and our thoughtless acceptance of the advice to follow conventional moral beliefs. Some of our difficulties, confusion, and suffering may arise not because we misuse language, but because we use it in the way it was meant to be used.

There is no list of words that have suffered rhetorical abuse because every word in the language (including the word 'is') can be fooled with for honorable or nefarious purposes. As we have just seen, clarity about the uses of our words and a measure of mindfulness and self-control can save us much trouble. Sextus and Wittgenstein understood that the time spent on certain questions was time wasted, but they did not mistrust language as such, only some of the things we seem compelled to do with it. Wittgenstein said that as long as language does not "take a

holiday” from its normal everyday use, everything is in order—but that may not be so.

Some students of language have worried that language itself may be a deceiver. We have already been urged to watch for ambiguities and vagueness, to beware of emotive language, to avoid self-serving definitions and lazy explanations, to stop talking to ourselves in ways that foster resentment and fears, and to give up idle questions. But even that may not be enough to keep us out of trouble. If our misunderstandings are, as Wittgenstein said, “deep misunderstandings,” and if they extend deep into our normal and everyday ways of saying things, then perhaps the freedom from *philosophical* questions that Wittgenstein promised (and found) will not be enough to relieve our non-philosophical distress. There are other things we need to understand about language if we hope to find peace and happiness, or to establish a harmonious relationship with the rest of the world.

(3) Buddha and the Buddhists. Walking away from some questions (the ones with no answers) is probably a good idea, but since some very hard questions do have answers, we had better remind ourselves that it is a mistake to give up too soon. There are, however, questions that have been failing to get satisfactory answers for thousands of years, and it is those questions that sometimes fascinate us, though many of them no longer merit our serious attention. Like Sextus and Wittgenstein, the Buddha was renowned for dismissing what he considered to be unanswerable questions. In one *sutra*, he was asked if the world is eternal or not, if the soul is the same as the body or not, and if a Buddha exists after death or not. He replied that he never promised to answer these questions, and that

a person who insists on answers is like a man who, shot by a poison arrow, will not consent to have it removed until he has been given detailed information about the arrow, the physician, and his assailant. That person would die, said the Buddha, without knowing all this. (Hamilton, 54-55) Elsewhere, he described each of a number of philosophical opinions and its denial as “a jungle, a wilderness, a puppet-show, a writhing, and a fetter” that is “coupled with misery, ruin, despair, and agony.” (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 289-290).

While the Buddha never offered an answer to any of these ultimate questions, he understood that there are important and answerable questions about the world we inhabit and experience. His “Four Noble Truths” and “Eightfold Path”, mentioned in Chapter Seven, tell us things he thought we need to know if we are interested in diminishing our suffering. Another important teaching of the Buddha, and of all Buddhists, is that everything in our world is “impermanent.” Everything had a beginning, will come to an end, and undergoes constant change on the way from the one to the other. Some things may appear stable and permanent, but if we study them carefully we learn that they are neither. Buddhists believe that our unwillingness to accept this gracefully is an important cause of our suffering.

In his practice as a physician, Sextus also dealt with appearances, applying remedies that were experienced to have a desired effect—like the lowering of a fever, or the silencing of a cough or a dogma. Wittgenstein also claimed not to be interested in explanations but in cures and his method was to remind his “patients” of the way words actually function, hoping this would make it clear to them how far they had strayed from plain sense.

By demanding that philosophers look carefully at what they are saying when they are indulging in philosophy, he hoped to shock them out of their confused commitment to some misguided philosophical belief like Platonism, or the idea that a word's meaning is what it refers to. On this matter, then, the Buddha, Sextus, and Wittgenstein are on the same page. Nagging but unanswerable questions are a symptom of errors we make about language and its use. The cure is to understand language well enough to make those questions, especially the ones about how things are in themselves, go away.

Many converts to Buddhism from Hinduism were not able to step away from their old questions and habits of reflection, and they were not quite ready to see the quest for "The Real" as "a jungle, a wilderness, a puppet-show, a writhing, and a fetter" that is "coupled with misery, ruin, despair, and agony." So they ignored the Buddha's advice and his practice and plunged back into the lobster pot. They developed the idea that the world of changing and interacting objects (tables and chairs again) is not the "real" world, and then they embraced Sextus' abandoned dream of finding out something about that hidden reality behind the appearances.

These early Buddhist philosophers were not mystics. They developed an "atomic theory" of both the physical and the mental worlds, and they employed their meditation-fueled introspection to watch the bits and pieces into which they had analyzed the world flow by. They called patches of color, bits of sound, noises, and feelings "*dharmas*," and they believed that the "things" of our world like tables, chairs, and mental events such as episodes of fear and anger, are ever-changing combinations of those *dharmas* sweeping by in a multi-layered stream of

consciousness. They believed that out of these fragments, and with the help of language, we build a world of conventional things that, as Bronowski said, “does not exist for animals.” When Twentieth Century Anglo-American philosophers adopted a similar view, they expressed it by saying that tables are “logical constructions out of sense-data.”

For a time these introspective Buddhist philosophers believed that they had discovered that the reality behind our world of tables and chairs is a cascade of streaming *dharmas*, the independently real material and mental atoms (units, elements, components) out of which everything else, both physical and mental, is constituted. But that belief was soon criticized on the grounds that *dharmas* are every bit as conventional and impermanent as the objects they were said to constitute. The Buddhists who accepted this criticism ended up with the belief that since nothing is eternal and nothing creates itself, everything that exists owes its existence to something else, and its character to convention. They found no eternal creator at the top, no minute permanent building blocks at the bottom, and only conventional objects in the middle. **Madhyamika Buddhists** express this thought by saying that everything is **empty**. Their term for what everything is empty *of* is ‘**self-existence**’ (or ‘**own-being**’ or ‘**essence**’). To *have* own-being is to exist *on one’s own*, that is, to be independent of everything else. To *lack* own-being is to depend on another. Everything, according to these Buddhist philosophers, lacks own-being, which means that everything exists and becomes what it is with the help of some set of conditions. Seemingly solid items such as chairs and mountains are not the solid, unchanging, independent “things” we naively think they are.

The claim that everything is empty does not mean that things do not exist, it means that things do not exist in the independent way they seem to. Working under the influence of the mistaken belief that meaningful words are names of independent objects, we tend to treat things, places, and events as if they were more solid, more sharply defined, more enduring, than the temporary mind-dependent constructions they are. We treat people as if they were well-formed and stable individuals, we think of emotions and feelings as separate and identifiable events, and we think and speak as if actions have their own beginnings, middles, and ends. We divide the world into causes and effects, things and properties, comings and goings, and we never consider that these items only exist “from our side,” and that they take on significance because we have cut them out from the flow of experience by using the categories we develop as we learn to speak. The Buddhists call this process *prapança*, which they define as “the meaningful conceptualization of the world through the use of language.” (Mitchell, p. 140)

That which we do not and can not experience may be “there,” and if so, it is what it is, but we have no words for it, and so here is another place where a silent understanding is all we could ever hope for, if even that. Our words only work in and on the world we inhabit, so absolutely nothing can be said about Ultimate Reality. If the Madhyamika Buddhist is right, the ultimate truth, which is not a truth about *ultimate* reality, is that everything in our world is empty (of “own-being”). Anything we can deal with or talk about is impermanent and dependent on conditions and conventions.

If and when our intellectual journey leads us to this point, we will be faced with a choice. Since any reality that can not be tamed by our concepts is unknowable and indescribable, we will either have to find some other way to approach and experience that reality, or we will have to forget about that reality and stick with the familiar one and the conventional truths about it, as Sextus, Wittgenstein, the Buddha, and some of his followers urged us to do.

Within that conventional world there is an intelligible and discoverable distinction between appearance and reality, and impermanence is a fact of life. But that world is not good enough for the Mystics, who have accordingly chosen to try to visit the “real” real world, the one unstructured by language. Some hope that certain forms of yoga or meditation or even divine grace will allow them to break through to some higher “truth,” though the word ‘truth’ is inappropriate because truths involve language. They feel that there must be some way to part the veil that separates us from “true reality,” some mode of awareness that bypasses our senses and our “mere” words and lets us experience the indescribable, unnameable, apophatic, and ineffable Reality itself.

Because mystics have abandoned the attempt to speak of this Reality, they can’t even share their experiences with other mystics, but there is no doubt that some of them have experienced extraordinary and dramatic states of consciousness. However, these events are not quite so impressive now that we are beginning to understand how adept the brain is at generating altered states of consciousness in those who know what to do (or ingest) in order to trigger them. As William James pointed out over 100 years ago, mystical states “carry authority” for

those who have them, but no one else can be faulted for doubting that the mystic's visions provide knowledge of some "other" reality. (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*)

What is beyond language may be some "other reality," but as the young Wittgenstein said at the close of his *Tractatus*, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." (TLP, 7) Let us do that and turn to the question of how we might proceed once we have decided to confine our words and thoughts to the world we do experience. What remains then is (1) a conventional reality that depends for its character on our conceptualizations, (2) a language that is adequate for our needs, but still open to many of the types of abuse we mentioned earlier, and (3) a silence about the "beyond" that matches the silence of the mystic, but one that is fueled more by disinterest than by awe.

Not only are words inadequate to convey any truth about reality *as it is in itself*, they can also be problematic when used to speak about the more familiar conventional reality. Sextus and Wittgenstein seem to think that we will not suffer too many language-born infections if we avoid philosophical questions, confine our conversation to every-day matters, pay careful attention to what we and others are saying, and follow convention. But if, as the Buddhists insist, everything is empty, and if the world that appears to us has been structured by our concepts, then the "things" we experience can be seen in a different light. Some of the structuring we do is unavoidable, but many of our categories and projections are optional, and when we realize this we can, in a limited way, remake our world.

The world remains independent of our will, but not quite as independent as we might have thought. We can still ask and discover what things are *really* like, or what is *really* happening, but we will intend these questions in a down-to-earth way. What we want to know will be a function of our beliefs, interests, and intentions. An adequate answer will provide a more complete, informative, focused, and contextualized characterization of what or who we were asking about. ‘Real’ and ‘really’ are, after all, words that have a place in our everyday discourse, as when we ask: “Is it real gold chair, or just a stage prop?” or “Are you really a Buddhist?”

With this understanding of emptiness comes the idea that everything depends on conditions and conventions, and that while the “things” of the world are all conventional, some are more so than others. Consider the concept of a cause. The Buddhist understanding of causality is that many factors and conventions have blended together to produce what we identify as the event that appears before us. They believe that with attention we can become familiar with this process, and occasionally, in some small way, exercise control over it. But they also believe that it would be a mistake to search for some one cause of the event rather than to explore the larger set of conditions that led to it. If we reject knee-jerk attributions of causality (which are often accompanied by knee-jerk attributions of responsibility and blame), we can take the time to reflect on the way the situation before us has developed. If we are observant, relatively unimpaired by concepts, and practiced in thin-slicing, we can do this non-verbally and in the wink of an eye.

The most dramatic manifestation of the Buddhist idea of emptiness may be that found in the acts and words of some of the Chinese Chan Masters. We have

already seen how Huangbo and Huihai urge us to strive for a “silent understanding.” At the time, I suggested that they were urging us to allow a situation to sink in before our concepts close our minds to the complexity. This is a skill we have to learn (or re-learn), because as we strive to fit in with everyone else we automatically internalize the language and concepts of our group. In the beginning, as the Buddhists say, for us a mountain is a mountain and a tree is a tree. If we have the luxury and time to think, we begin to reflect. Reflection may lead us to views such as Hinduism, or the theory that everything is really composed of *dharmas*, or atoms, or even ideas. At this second (philosophical) stage of our development we may be unwilling to admit that a tree is a tree or a mountain is a mountain. If and when we manage to understand the various turns of thought that led to these skeptical and literally false pronouncements, we are ready to say, once again, that trees are trees and mountains are mountains—but this time with an understanding of what is going on when people say that trees are *not* trees, or that mountains are *not* mountains.

Wittgenstein asked us to look at the phenomenon of UNDERSTANDING. It can come in a flash, but the flash—what comes just before the shout of aha!”—is not the understanding. When we have understood something we have attained a new state, a non-verbalized awareness of a pattern that gives us the confidence that we know what to do and how to do it. Things fall into place. This is probably what Huangbo was talking about when he referred to that silent understanding. We can learn much in a moment of intense and informed observation. Afterwards we can resort to language and start writing down the details of our observation, if we have the time and the skill, but anything we could write down or say will express only a

small part of our understanding. The way to be sure that someone really understands something, in the “ordinary” sense of ‘understand’, is to pay attention to what he or she does.

Some words are used to do far more than name or describe objects. When they are positively or negatively charged we might want to think twice before giving in to their power. If we come to realize that “there are no objective values,” then it will be hard to take that knowledge back to our everyday world and return to calling impiety evil, for example.

We must live in the everyday world, but it helps to be constantly aware that, to some undeterminable extent, that world is one of our own construction. This means that it cannot be taken perfectly seriously. But it is *our* world, so it has to be taken seriously enough. If we have no choice but to live in our constructed world, we might as well do so with the awareness of what we are doing and of how much suffering we can generate (both for ourselves and for others) if we fail to get clear about what is “really” happening. If we include in this inquiry a serious interest in how things are for the others, we will have opened the door to compassion, cooperation, and quite possibly to a much happier and more harmonious life.

4. Tools for Clarity and Health. In Chapter Eight we explored a few of the techniques we use to influence each other, and this chapter has focused on some of the ways language facilitates both our bondage and our freedom. Each of our three “physicians” identified a disease, a therapy, and the state of a person who has been returned to health. When we are cured by Sextus, questions about ultimate reality and the true nature of things no longer cry out for answers, and we can avoid any

discomfort generated by the mistaken belief that only answers to those questions would lead us to happiness. When we are healed by Wittgenstein we have not only won freedom from philosophical questions, but we also realize that the underlying cause of the questions (which are only the symptoms) is a horribly confused understanding of the actual way language works. When this is cleared up, we understand why the questions are out of order. Finally, when we take the Buddha's medicine, we learn to look at the world without being distracted by desires and inattention. We purify ourselves of the three Buddhist "evils," greed, hatred, and delusion, we learn to speak without thinking that language completely in order as it is, and we come to trust our spontaneous responses.

Now, let us assemble some of the things we may have learned about language so that we can avoid some of those "traps that language sets us."

- (1) Be on the lookout for metaphorical systems that frame the way people understand situations. (ARGUMENT is WAR).
- (2) Do not be content with simplistic explanations from others, nor sell them to yourself. Things are always more complicated than you think.
- (3) When things happen, make no response, or at least silence your assessor for a few seconds.
- (4) Neither exploit nor fall victim to vagueness.
- (5) Avoid ambiguity and when it seems likely to result in misunderstanding, move to clear it up.
- (6) Understand emotive language, respect its power, and do not be

overcome by it or use it to manipulate others.

(7) Stop complaining about what others do.

(8) Do not dwell on worst case scenarios.

(9) Forget philosophical questions, or treat them as historical relics.

(10) Allow the understanding of emptiness and prapañca to calm your emotions and desires.

When we have learned to do some of these things we will be in a position to start trusting our spontaneous thoughts and decisions. But everything depends on being clear about what is going on in and around us. Without a reasonably clear understanding of the relevant circumstances, our explanations will be fantasies, our alternatives restricted, and our solutions and decisions inappropriate. In that case, our spontaneity will flow from ignorance, fear, or some other powerful emotion, and the outcome will be a matter of luck—usually bad luck.

When we understand language so well that words no longer confuse or inflame us, we will begin to get a clear view of the flow of events in which we are embedded and their connections. We will know both how important and how unimportant words are. We will develop an appreciation for “causality,” as the Buddha urged, or for the Way of things, as Laozi recommended. This will include a clear view of the aspirations and ideas of others, and while this is not guaranteed to trigger compassionate impulses, it usually does. Other things being equal, the better we know and understand someone, the more difficult it is to cause or allow him or her to suffer. This is why we foster superficial stereotypes of our enemies and our

victims. The better we understand the ways of others, the easier it will be to get along with them.

When we are clear about the way language works we will be able to see through the efforts to control our thoughts and behavior by those whose goals are different from ours, but we will also be in a position to use tricks of language to control the lives and decisions of others. Which way shall we go? Shall we free ourselves from linguistic manipulation only to practice it on others? Perhaps our answer will depend on whether we see others as partners in a cooperative enterprise or as workers who need our supervision. There are different metaphors that guide us in these dealings. Do we see them as sheep or companions? Which way will we choose, the way of control or the way of harmony? In the next chapter we will explore these alternatives, and I will, not surprisingly, support the latter.