THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

CAN WE SAY WHAT WE MEAN AND MEAN WHAT WE SAY?

Dr. Peter Vardy
Twitter: @puzzlevardy
King Lear

• King Lear has three daughters. He is getting older and drifting towards death and he decides to divide his kingdom to ‘younger powers’ – effectively his three daughters and their husbands.

• His favourite daughter, Cordelia, is also the youngest.

• He has a map spread out on the floor and ask his daughters to tell him how much they loved him.

• The first two daughters express their complete and undying love but Cordelia refuses.
“I LOVE YOU”

• You may have said this to someone or someone may have said it to you.
• BUT WHAT DID THEY OR YOU ACTUALLY MEAN BY THIS?
• Love tends to be temporary, transient. Few relationships endure – a third of all marriages end in divorce.
• Most relationships begun in school collapse within a year of leaving school.
• So what does it MEAN to say ‘I love you’ – do we even know ourselves!? 
‘I BELIEVE IN GOD’

• Many religious people may say this, but what does it MEAN?
• Does it mean ‘I believe that God exists’? And what does ‘God’ mean??
• There is a difference between believing THAT something exists and believing IN something.
• PV believes THAT Trump is the President of the U.S.A. – he certainly does not believe IN Trump!
• So what would it mean for someone to say ‘I believe in God’.
• President Pinochet was responsible for the death of thousands but went to Catholic Mass every week and certainly said he believed in God.. But what does this mean??
THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

• The Philosophy of language belongs in the Anglo-American, analytic tradition of philosophy. Its history is particularly grounded in the 20th century...

• The central issues it raises deal with:
  • QUESTIONS OF REALITY
  • QUESTIONS OF REFERENCE
  • QUESTIONS OF MEANING
  • QUESTIONS OF INTENTIONALITY
QUESTIONS OF REALITY
Imagine...

• Two young fish are swimming along together.
• They meet an older fish swimming the opposite way. He asks them “How’s the water?”... they go on swimming.
• A little later one of the two fish asks the other, ‘What is water’..
Reality

• Plato argued that we live in a ‘dance of shadows’ – ultimate reality lies beyond what we can experience.

• Immanuel Kant agreed – we are prisoners of our senses. The world as we experience it is the **phenomenal world** – BUT THIS IS NOT THE SAME AS THE **NOUMENAL WORLD** - The world as it really is independent of our senses.

• If we are considering language, therefore, we need to be aware of what is the nature of reality that language sees to represent.
We are prisoners of language

• We are partly prisoners of language. We have evolved language to describe medium sized objects but we now know there is much, much more to reality than those things we can see, touch and feel. The world of experience is only part of reality.

• Certainly the quantum world is real and exists – religion claims there is also a transcendent world.

• We now know there are at least NINE (possibly eleven) dimensions.

• The film FLATLAND illustrates this.
"If the only tool you have is a hammer, you will treat everything as if it were a nail." (Abraham Maslow)

If the only way we have to communicate is language (which is drawn from the phenomenological world of space and time) then we will only see reality as spatio-temporal.

Most of the most important things in life we cannot speak about adequately.
QUESTIONS OF REFERENCE
The search for foundations for knowledge seems to be at an end.

Aristotle, Locke and other empiricists sought foundations for truth in experience. Their arguments were a posteriori.

Plato, Anselm, Descartes and Leibniz sought truth in ideas in the mind. Their arguments were a priori.

G.E. Moore (‘In Defence of Common Sense) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (‘On Certainty’) rejected the idea of absolute foundations for knowledge.

Language makes contact with the world in banal statements that it does not make sense to doubt.
No fixed meanings

• Wittgenstein recognised that language is public. The idea of a private language is of very limited use and barely makes sense.

• Meaning then depends on the community in which language develops and meaning is slippery – yet truth is even more complex.

• Even words are fluid:
  • He is a gay young man….

• Words do not have fixed meanings and meaning depends on context.
  • My bat is in the attic
  • There are bats in the attic.
RULES FOR LANGUAGE

• Wittgenstein argued that we are educated into what he calls a FORM OF LIFE – a community in which certain things are taken for granted.

• There are GROUND RULES for the form of life which everyone learns to accept at a very early age – indeed these are the banal statements whereby language makes contact with the world (cf G.E. Moore and ‘In Defence of Common Sense’).

• There are also RULES that are followed within the community.
Meaning, truth and reference...

• If meaning depends on use within a shared Form of Life, then so (it can be argued) does truth...
• Truth is not some neutral thing, nor is truth something private.
• Truth is a product of language and rests on a shared understanding.
• This led to a radical change in which the idea of truth was understood as there was a change in the idea of reference...
QUESTIONS OF MEANING
My darling,

There is only one thing I can say.

There is no sense in doing a lot of barking if you don't really have anything to say.

What do you mean?

Even with footnotes, I don't understand a word you're saying...
We do not only communicate only with words and, perhaps, this is a weakness in the whole way in which the Philosophy of Language is conducted...

I don't just listen to your words.
I watch your face.
I stare into your eyes.
I check out your body language.
I peep your tone.
I make note of your use of words.
I hear what you don't say.
I interpret your silences.

Most importantly.. I trust my intuition.
Meaning and culture

• Wittgenstein recognised the cultural relativity of language when serving in the First World War on a river battleship on the Eastern front.
  • He served with men from many different countries and recognised the difficulty they had in communicating.
• In the 1980s, sticky tape in Australia was called ‘Durex’ – this provoked amusement when Australians went to a shop in England and asked for Durex to secure parcels.
• The first edition of the new Top Gear includes Jeremy Clarkson referring to the different words use by Americans to describe a gear level (‘stick’), a bonnet (‘hood) and other car items…
Meaning and a Form of Life

• For Wittgenstein, meaning depends on the form of life in which words are said. There are no fixed meanings.

• In 1985 Janet Martin Soskice published a study of metaphor in religious and scientific language, arguing that in both cases language can be meaningful because of the context. Her work arose as a result of Critical Realist enquiries into science and religion.

• She argues that in both science and religion metaphors are necessary.
CONVEYING TRUTH

• Critical Realism encouraged writers in Science and Theology to reflect on the process of their own thinking and writing and see that they could not be neutral observers, to accept that although both science and theology are about ‘truth’, that this can be elusive.

• In both cases, scientific and religious language operates within a paradigm or a form of life and are conditioned by these.

• In both cases major revisions may be possible BUT THEY BOTH ATTEMPT TO CONVEY TRUTH....
SAYING WHAT YOU MEAN

• To say when you mean is hard enough and requires you to be clear on what you mean before you say it – which is not easy.
• Words are clumsy
• What someone says may not be precisely what they mean and what they say may be heard differently by different listeners
• They may not even consider what they mean when they say things!
Aristotle argued that God, if God exists, must be timeless, spaceless and utterly immutable. Radically different from anything in the universe.

- Although Aristotle’s God was the prime mover, radically different from the God of religion.

Nevertheless Islamic philosophers accepted his logic as did the great Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides.

Their writings, and that of Aristotle, directly influenced St. Thomas Aquinas and Catholic theology.
THE PROBLEM

• If God is timeless and spaceless, bodiless and utterly unchangeable how does this affect language about God?

• Human language is drawn from the spatio-temporal world and, therefore, is useless in speaking about such a different reality.
  • Maimonides concluded that one should be silent before the mystery of God.
  • This gave rise to the ‘via negativa’ or negative way which said one should focus on what God is not…..
  • God is NOT in time, NOT in space, has NOT get a body, does NOT change, etc..
St. Thomas Aquinas

- Understandably, Aquinas could not accept the Via Negativa yet he was a brilliant and honest philosopher and accepted that language about God could:
  - NOT be univocal (used in the same sense as normal language)
  - NOT be equivocal (used in a totally inrelated sense to normal language)
- His solution was that language about God should be ANALOGICAL.
Aquinas’ approach to analogy again draws on Aristotle who argued that what it means to describe something as ‘good’ depends on its nature.

- A good chestnut tree fulfils the POTENTIAL and nature of a chestnut tree
- A good giraffe fulfils the POTENTIAL and nature of a giraffe.
- A good comet fulfils the POTENTIAL and nature of a comet
- A good human beings fulfils the POTENTIAL and nature of a human being.

Everything in the universe is actual in that it exists, and also has potentiality in that it can change.
ARISTOTLE AND POTENTIAL

Aristotle argued that every animal and plant had potentialities built in:

- The acorn has the potential to become an oak tree
- A tadpole has the potential to become an active, adult frog
- A human embryo has the potential to become a full human being

In ethics, the central question is “WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO FULFILL HUMAN POTENTIAL?”

Some actions lead us away from fulfilling our potential (and these are wrong actions) and others lead us closer to ‘becoming fully human’ (fulfilling our potential)
GOD HAS NO POTENTIAL!

• Given that God is timeless, spaceless and immutable, GOD CANNOT BE OTHER THAN GOD IS.
• God is, therefore, PURE ACTUALITY, perfectly what it is to be God and has no potential to be anything else.
• So, NECESSARILY, God is perfectly what it means to be God and, by definition, God is therefore perfectly good
  • Since, for Aristotle and Aquinas, to be good means to fulfil potential
• It is therefore true to say that God is good, but this does NOT mean anything like what it means for a giraffe or a human to be good!
Meaning and language

• So the MEANING of religious language is not the same as when the same language is applied to objects in the spatio-temporal world.

• God is good, Charlotte is good and the giraffe is good do not mean the same.

• EXCEPT in so far as they are both good in relation to what it is to be God, a human being or a giraffe.
QUESTIONS OF INTENTIONALITY
Some philosophers such as John Austin argued that language was a tool for doing and achieving things and they sought to examine the multiple ways in which language could be used. As an example, the sentence:

“It is raining outside.”

could be a report of a state of affairs, a warning to take an umbrella, a lie (to stop someone going out), practicing English in a foreign country or many other things.

Pragmatically we need to consider not just the words but the context, the situation as well as the intention of the person saying the words.
Pragmatism

• This contextual element of pragmatism leads to a focus on the goals that a speaker seeks to achieve by saying something in a particular way in that context and why she might have done this.

• What a speaker means in saying something is often explained by an emphasis on the speaker's intentions.
  • It also seeks to reveal to the hearer that the speaker wants the hearer to respond in a certain way and thus to get the hearer to respond in this way.

• This can be related to EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE
Language used to manipulate..

- Language can be used to manipulate – great orators always do this.
- Hitler was a great orator. 78% of German women voted for him in 1932. But that does not mean he was a good man.
- Many papers manipulate us today – for instance Iran is described as a hotbed of terrorism. We are told it is right to oppose the Ayatoolahs and their vicious regime.
- What is the matter with this??
- In ‘Inside Outside’ language is used to manipulate emotions.
“I WANT TO GO TO BED WITH YOU”

“I WANT TO MARRY YOU AND LIVE WITH YOU FOR EVER”

“I’M BORED AND WANT YOU AS MY NEXT CONQUEST”

“I AM LONELY AND WANT SOMEONE TO GO OUT WITH”

“I WANT TO TAKE YOU AWAY FROM A FRIEND”

“I’M JUST MAKING CONVERSATION, HAVE HAD SOMETHING TO DRINK AND THE LIGHT IS POOR”

“I WANT TO GO TO BED WITH YOU”

“I’M GAY AND NEED A GIRLFRIEND TO CONVINCE PEOPLE I AM STRAIGHT”

“I FIND YOUR MIND FASCINATING

SPEECH ACT THEORISTS CLAIMS YOU CANNOT UNDERSTAND THE WORDS IN ISOLATION FROM THE INTENTIONS

PERHAPS THE PERSON SAYING THE WORDS DOES NOT KNOW WHAT HE MEANS!

AND THE INTENTIONS MAY NOT BE CLEAR!!

I’M JUST MAKING CONVERSATION, HAVE HAD SOMETHING TO DRINK AND THE LIGHT IS POOR

PERHAPS THE PERSON SAYING THE WORDS DOES NOT KNOW WHAT HE MEANS!

SPEECH ACT THEORISTS CLAIMS YOU CANNOT UNDERSTAND THE WORDS IN ISOLATION FROM THE INTENTIONS

AND THE INTENTIONS MAY NOT BE CLEAR!!

I’M JUST MAKING CONVERSATION, HAVE HAD SOMETHING TO DRINK AND THE LIGHT IS POOR

PERHAPS THE PERSON SAYING THE WORDS DOES NOT KNOW WHAT HE MEANS!

SPEECH ACT THEORISTS CLAIMS YOU CANNOT UNDERSTAND THE WORDS IN ISOLATION FROM THE INTENTIONS

AND THE INTENTIONS MAY NOT BE CLEAR!!

I’M JUST MAKING CONVERSATION, HAVE HAD SOMETHING TO DRINK AND THE LIGHT IS POOR

PERHAPS THE PERSON SAYING THE WORDS DOES NOT KNOW WHAT HE MEANS!

SPEECH ACT THEORISTS CLAIMS YOU CANNOT UNDERSTAND THE WORDS IN ISOLATION FROM THE INTENTIONS

AND THE INTENTIONS MAY NOT BE CLEAR!!

I’M JUST MAKING CONVERSATION, HAVE HAD SOMETHING TO DRINK AND THE LIGHT IS POOR

PERHAPS THE PERSON SAYING THE WORDS DOES NOT KNOW WHAT HE MEANS!

SPEECH ACT THEORISTS CLAIMS YOU CANNOT UNDERSTAND THE WORDS IN ISOLATION FROM THE INTENTIONS

AND THE INTENTIONS MAY NOT BE CLEAR!!

I’M JUST MAKING CONVERSATION, HAVE HAD SOMETHING TO DRINK AND THE LIGHT IS POOR

PERHAPS THE PERSON SAYING THE WORDS DOES NOT KNOW WHAT HE MEANS!

SPEECH ACT THEORISTS CLAIMS YOU CANNOT UNDERSTAND THE WORDS IN ISOLATION FROM THE INTENTIONS

AND THE INTENTIONS MAY NOT BE CLEAR!!

I’M JUST MAKING CONVERSATION, HAVE HAD SOMETHING TO DRINK AND THE LIGHT IS POOR

PERHAPS THE PERSON SAYING THE WORDS DOES NOT KNOW WHAT HE MEANS!

SPEECH ACT THEORISTS CLAIMS YOU CANNOT UNDERSTAND THE WORDS IN ISOLATION FROM THE INTENTIONS

AND THE INTENTIONS MAY NOT BE CLEAR!!

I’M JUST MAKING CONVERSATION, HAVE HAD SOMETHING TO DRINK AND THE LIGHT IS POOR

PERHAPS THE PERSON SAYING THE WORDS DOES NOT KNOW WHAT HE MEANS!
The problems of texting

• One of the main problems of texting is that one cannot see the human action of speaking – one cannot judge what is being said by words alone.

• So much else is happening.

• Words divorced from human interaction are empty vessels and, at the least, are capable of very considerable misinterpretation.
NON VERBAL COMMUNICATION

• TAKE TWO MINUTES WITH THE PERSON NEXT TO YOU TO DISCUSS WHAT ‘NON VERBAL COMMUNICATION’ MEANS..

• How important do you think it is?
ILLOCUTIONARY AND PERLOCTIONARY INTENTIONS

• ILLOCUTIONARY INTENTIONS are where the statements are intended to get the hearer to understand what is being said and to recognise a state of affairs.

• PERLOCTIONARY INTENTIONS are where the statements are intended to get the hearer to do something.
  - The statement ‘Fred is a fortune hunter’ might be to get the hearer to understand more about Fred.
  - However if there was a Perlocutionary intention then the aim might be to stop one’s sister from dating Fred.
TYPES OF SPEECH ACTS

• Most philosophers who analyse speech acts have four categories:
  1) UTTERANCE ACTS
      • The act of saying something!
  2) PROPOSITIONAL ACTS
      • Referring to some thing or state of affairs and describing it
  3) ILLUCTIONARY ACTS
      • Interaction with other people for instance in terms of conversation
  4) PERLOCUTIONARY ACTS
      • Seeking to persuade someone into action or a way of thinking.
• So language is embedded in action.

• In the Australian film ‘Tomorrow when the war began’, the ‘butch’ hero is trying to get involved with one of the girls – Corrie.

• Australia has been invaded by a neighbouring country and all a group of young people’s parents have been assembled at the Show ground. They come out of a weekend away together to find everything has changed. They decide they must investigate…
YOUR LIFE CONVEYS TRUTH

• Are words unhelpful?
• Soren Kierkegaard argued that “As you have lived, so have you believed”
• It is not the words you use but the way you conduct your life that indicates the true state of affairs.
  • It is not saying ‘I love you’, buying roses and remembering birthdays that indicates love…
  • Similarly it is not assenting to the words of a religious creed that indicate whether one is religious but how one’s belief affects one’s life.
Soren Kierkegaard argued that ‘direct communication’ (which involves someone telling you something however clearly this may be expressed) is unhelpful in communicating the most profound truths.

What is required is indirect communication - this means helping someone to come to see something for themselves.

- Someone lecturing you about love will not bring you to understand love. It needs to be modelled – you need to see it in action.
- Direct communication often fails

- Sometimes poetry and story can be a better way of communicating truth that simple (or complex) words...
• If someone grows up in a household:
  • where real love is absent;
  • if someone lives with parents who give them whatever they want but never spend time with them and never really care for them or
  • if someone has been orphaned in war and abused as a child and never really been loved ….

• ….then it may not be possible for them to understand what love is.

• Everyone has needs (Abram Maslow recognised this with his hierarchy of needs) and some will think that in order to be loved they have to have sex….

• The seducer can ‘play’ on these needs….
Soren Kierkegaard

• Kierkegaard was a Lutheran philosopher – he was profoundly concerned that we should think about our lives... about how to live and how to die.

• WHO ARE YOU AT 2.00am in the morning, free of the masks that we all wear?
Kierkegaard was a realist

- He did not think that there was any proof for some of the most important questions – but we have no choice but to ‘stake our lives’.
- He is described as advocating a ‘leap of faith’ but this is a mistake – we have to take a decision taking all our experience into account and then stake our lives… knowing that we might be wrong.
- His philosophic nickname was ‘EITHER/OR’.