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Much Ado About Words: Some Reflections on Language, Philosophy, and Theology

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TO BE back in Oxford again after a lapse of twenty-four years is an absorbing and disturbing experience. The passing on of so many notable former teachers is an unhappy reminder of the passing of one's own youth. On the other hand, the abiding beauty of Oxford and the English spring refreshes the spirit with a sense of that which abides in the midst of flux, to quote the late A. N. Whitehead. But enough of this autobiography. It did seem to me that readers of the *Canadian Journal of Theology* might be interested to have some impressions of the changes which have taken place in the theological and philosophical atmosphere of Oxford over the past quarter of a century. Everyone has heard at least of linguistic philosophy or philosophical analysis or logical positivism, though the precise connotation of these phrases is not so well appreciated. It is generally known that philosophy in Britain in this century has been increasingly concerned with the analysis of language, and that there has been a powerful reaction against the idealist tradition so notably represented by F. H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, and Pringle-Pattison in Scotland, to mention only a few. Some of the earlier extreme phases of this kind of analysis had dismissed religious language as meaningless, and ethical language as only emotive ejaculations. A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Gollancz, 1936) was the classical example of this earlier uncompromising logical positivism.

It would, however, be a mistake to assume that philosophical analysis is the only dominant influence in British philosophy today. One need only consult *Contemporary British Philosophy* (edited by H. D. Lewis, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1956), to see this. Professor R. G. Mure's recent *Retreat from Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958) is a caustic attack upon linguistic analysis and all its works from the standpoint of Hegelian idealism. Incidentally, it is stimulating to find that in England today, philosophy is by no means an esoteric interest. A. J. Ayer is a familiar figure on television panel programmes. The Third Programme of the B.B.C. recently had four extremely good talks on Ludwig Wittgenstein, that strange genius from Austria and former Cambridge teacher, who is regarded by many as chiefly responsible for the present interest in language. His *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, 1922) and *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953) seem to have a kind of biblical authority for his more passionate devotees. The public interest in current philosophy was shown not long ago in a correspondence in that typical English Institution,

The Times. A book was recently published entitled *Words and Things: an Examination of, and an Attack on, Linguistic Philosophy*, by Ernest Gellner, a Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics. As the sub-title indicates, this is an attack, conducted with considerable verve and rather biting sarcasm, on the leading linguistic philosophers in England at the present time. Professor Gilbert Ryle, the editor of *Mind*, and himself a leading representative of modern empiricism and linguistic philosophy, refused to review the book for *Mind* on the grounds that the author had accused modern philosophers of being disingenuous. The result was a letter to *The Times* by Bertrand Russell in defence of Mr. Gellner, accusing Mr. Ryle of unfair partisanship. This was enough to start one of those correspondences for which *The Times* is famous, with everyone happily joining in the debate as to whether linguistic philosophy is the last sign of decadence or the beginning of a grand philosophical renaissance. This at least made philosophy "news" for several weeks. I shall attempt to indicate briefly what the debate was about, and then add some reflections on the bearing of all this upon the works of the theologian.

Those who wish for a review of the history of philosophical analysis in this century should consult Professor Urmson's *Philosophical Analysis* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956). The key names in this development are G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and later Gilbert Ryle and A. J. Ayer. Those who regard themselves as standing in this tradition believe that they are doing something new in philosophy. In fact, a series of essays with an introduction by Professor Gilbert Ryle, was published in 1956 under the title *The Revolution in Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1956). While some continuity with the past is acknowledged, particularly with the English empiricists, it is clear that the contributors believe that there has been a revolution in the understanding of what constitutes philosophy. What is the nature of this revolution? Professor G. J. Warnock indicates his views on this in his little book *English Philosophy since 1900* (London: Home University Library, 1958). The revolution involves the following two points:

(1) Its followers are suspicious of all attempts to tie up philosophy with *Weltanschauung*, i.e., to present a comprehensive and synoptic view of all truth issuing in religious or moral or philosophical dogmas about the universe "as a whole."

(2) Modern philosophy rarely deals directly with religious, moral and political questions, or with questions of cosmic import. Some regard this as a mere limitation of scope imposed by the kind of question that interests them, namely, the analysis of language. Others claim that philosophy has essentially nothing to do with such questions. "Philosophy is the study of the concepts that we employ, and not of the facts, phenomena, cases or events to which these concepts might be or are applied."¹

1. Warnock, G. J., *English Philosophy since 1900*, p. 167.

Philosophy, then, is ideologically neutral when questions regarding moral and spiritual *Weltanschauung* are concerned. Philosophy has now become a highly skilled, professional kind of competence, and the amateur can no longer hope to step in with his high sounding generalizations and moral and spiritual platitudes. It is this limitation of the scope and nature of philosophy which is the object of Mr. Gellner's special attack. Professor Ryle has pointed out that during the time between the undergraduate career of F. H. Bradley (1856–1924) and his own, academic intellectuals in Britain were predominantly clerical, and naturally most keenly interested in theological questions, either for or against. By the 1920's all this had changed. There had taken place a "laicising of our culture and a professionalising of philosophy." Logic, language and scientific method were the main preoccupations of the philosopher.

What then, according to Mr. Gellner, are the basic presuppositions of modern linguistic philosophy? The very use of this phrase may itself be criticized and indeed has been criticized as implying that all who adopt the method of philosophical analysis are themselves united in a special view of the nature of philosophy and agreed in accepting or dismissing certain kinds of language as meaningful or meaningless. Professor Gellner, however, is not deterred from asserting that certain very questionable assumptions underlie the methods of all these different thinkers. Whether each individual thinker consciously accepts each or all of these assumptions is not important. What is important is that their work adds up to a certain total impression as to how they conceive the role of philosophy. What, then, are the basic assumptions? First is what Gellner calls the argument from the paradigm case. To understand fully what is involved in this principle would demand a fuller treatment than is now possible of that strange figure, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Born in Vienna on 26 April 1889, of Jewish descent but with a Roman Catholic father, he early showed his passion for physics, his interest in machinery, and his desire to become an engineer. He came to England in 1908, and was deeply influenced by Bertrand Russell in mathematics. On the outbreak of war in 1914, he volunteered to serve in the Austrian army. After various experiences, he found his way to Cambridge and succeeded Moore in the chair of philosophy in 1939. He was too restless to remain in academic life for long and gave his last lectures in 1947. After two years of severe illness, he died, leaving behind him comparatively little in the way of published work but a powerful influence upon many of his most distinguished contemporaries.

Throughout his life, he was deeply and continuously concerned with the nature of language and its function. All language presupposes a non-linguistic context and is as much a part of normal social behaviour as eating, drinking and walking. It was this which led him to insist that the meaning of language is in its use. We must see how words and sentences function in actual daily usage. "The meaning of a word is its use in the language."²

2. Wittgenstein, L., *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 43.

It is this Wittgensteinian influence which leads the modern linguistic philosopher, according to Gellner, to try to answer philosophical problems by the analysis of the actual use of words in ordinary discourse. One might very well ask what is ordinary usage, the speech of the man in the street or the highly sophisticated talk of Cambridge dons. It was also Wittgenstein who coined the phrase "language games." Certain kinds of language express certain kinds of meaning and in actual fact we must understand the rules (*i.e.*, the assumptions underlying the particular usage of any kind of language) if we are to talk meaningfully in that kind of language. There are all sorts of language games and none can be ruled out as illegitimate nor can we jump from one language game to another and hope to be understood. But, says Gellner, if the final appeal is to actual usage of language, is this not in fact an appeal to uncriticized common sense and a refusal to ask questions of philosophical meaning which imply our ability to go beyond the actual use of language in one particular language game? When Dr. Johnson heard Berkeley's denial of the existence of matter, he kicked a stone, saying, "Thus I refute Berkeley." In fact he was doing no such thing and his action in no way refuted Berkeley's philosophical explanation of matter which was quite compatible with Johnson's ability to kick a stone. According to Gellner, the linguistic philosophers are kicking stones to solve their problems but are in fact solving nothing.³

Certain basic language games, according to these philosophers, are necessary. There are various species or categories of human discourse which must exist to express what we want to say about beauty, rightness, material objects, logical relations, etc. We cannot possibly deny these various categories. The denial of the language game of a particular species of human discourse is impossible, for this would mean that we could not talk at all about these things. But, argues Gellner, there is no reason why we should not deny a category in the name of truth and validity. The fact that a certain kind of language is used about witches and their rôle does not prove either that there are or that there are not witches. A philosopher may indeed deny a "whole genre of speech, witch language."⁴ This means that the actual use of language cannot be the court of final appeal. The limits of the various language games are not given once and for all. In so far then as linguistic philosophy is based upon the appeal to the paradigm case, *i.e.*, actual usage, it is an arbitrary refusal to face the genuine philosophical problems. Philosophy is the asking of questions about categories or species of language as a whole, and it is illegitimate to dub this extra-philosophical. The bane of linguistic philosophy is its attempt to limit philosophy to trivial exercises with language usage rather than to enter upon the reconsideration of basic philosophical concepts which concern the validity and meaningfulness of whole categories of species of language. Another basic weakness is the contrast theory of meaning. This implies that meaningfulness depends on

3. Gellner, E., *Words and Things*, p. 32.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

the fact that positive and negative statements can be made about a certain thing. An apple has meaning because some things are apples and others are not. If a term lacks this contrast or antithesis, it cannot be meaningfully defined. Since God is unique and cannot be defined by contrast with finite things, the word itself can convey no definite and clear-cut ideas. Again, one could not refute the doctrine that no moral statements are true, on the ground that it pointlessly abolishes the contrast between valid and invalid moral judgments. One could argue that the drawing of moral distinctions is a matter of subordinate distinctions within a wider class of meaningful assertions and that, within this wider contrast, this class of statements may be rejected as arbitrary, a bad move in a wider language game. In other words, this contrast theory of meaning is of no help at all in solving fundamental questions of validity of any particular species of language. Mr. Gellner's final charge is that linguistic philosophy, unlike Descartes, insists on unclear and indistinct ideas, and that it is contemptuous of generality, except perhaps in the sciences. In philosophy, generalizations as such are suspect and *ex officio* damned. For the philosopher, to be able to say what the world is really like implies a basic or fundamental language, but this latter is precisely what is impossible. Hence the logical analysts' stress upon the complexity and variety of the different language games to the exclusion of genuine philosophical thinking.

This summary does not exhaust the full content of Mr. Gellner's book, nor does it include the sarcastic wit with which it regales the reader. It is hoped, however, that this account will have laid bare the central issues of the debate between the author and those linguistic philosophers in whose tenets he was reared and against which he has so passionately revolted. Past philosophy assumed one language, and many problematic worlds or realms. Linguistic philosophy has many language uses in one unproblematic world. It claims to be neutral about this world, but in fact insinuates a vision of it. Moreover, the vision leaves much to be desired and its truth is certainly open to question. Mr. Gellner believes that linguistic philosophy ends in dullness and platitude, and in the evasion of basic thought about fundamental and genuine conceptual alternatives.

Needless to say, as the correspondence in *The Times* showed, this onslaught has provoked strong reaction both for and against. Professor Gellner has been accused of lumping all the linguistic philosophers together and attacking them all without discrimination or fair appraisal of the total views of individual men. This may be true, but the challenge to reconsider the fundamental assumptions of linguistic philosophy will be welcomed by many who do not accept the whole of the Gellner critique.

What has all this to do with the Christian theologian? Of course, it is possible to say that philosophers have always indulged in this kind of thing and let them get on with it. What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? The Christian is not wedded to any special philosophy at all, and another "revolution in philosophy" leaves him unmoved. For those, however, who

cherish the alliance of biblical faith and rational thought (and they are many from the early days of the church until now), the passing by of theology or philosophy on the other side of the road, like the priest and the Levite in the well-known parable, is much to be deplored. How far can theologians and philosophers learn to talk with each other again in language which is significant for both? How far can a Christian give a reason for the faith that is in him, without being mocked and scorned for his use of reason at all in defence of the faith?

It would be a mistake to assume that theologians and non-linguistic philosophers have been silent or inactive while this so-called revolution in philosophy has been taking place. I use the term non-linguistic as a convenient though admittedly imprecise label. It is one of the unfortunate popular impressions derived from linguistic philosophy that only modern philosophers have been interested in the careful analysis of language, its use and meaning. This, of course, is quite wrong. Aristotle, Aquinas, and Kant, to mention only the three most famous, were deeply concerned with problems of language, though their conclusions were vastly different from those of modern linguistic philosophers. However, the term non-linguistic can stand for the moment to designate those philosophical thinkers who would not consider themselves to belong to the succession described, for example, in Mr. Warnock's book.

What can the theologian do in this kind of atmosphere? He can attempt to vindicate the classic theological position. This has been done on the Roman Catholic side by such notable thinkers as Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain, and in England recently, by Father F. C. Copleston in his *Aquinas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955) and his monumental *History of Philosophy* (London: Burns Oates, 1946-). Among the Anglicans reference may be made to the works of Austin Farrer and E. L. Mascall. All these thinkers represent a creative restatement of Thomism, not a slavish and unimaginative reproduction of medieval forms of thought. On the other hand, the attempt may be made to offer a critique of empiricism, while accepting the challenge of linguistic philosophy as to the meaning of religious language and its verification. Thus we find Professor H. A. Hodges saying that anyone who takes theology seriously is "committed to rejecting important features of the empiricist logic."⁵

Another position is represented by Professor I. T. Ramsey in his two books *Religious Language* (London: SCM Press, 1957) and *Freedom and Immortality* (London: SCM Press, 1960). Dr. Ramsey regards logical empiricism, not as an enemy to be fought, but as "a tool which can be of the greatest service to theology." He believes, with some of the linguistic philosophers, that many theological problems and confusions stem from linguistic confusion, and that the theologian can clear up many of these with the aid of modern philosophical analysis. Religious language, he claims, must be appropriately "odd" to do justice to the discernment-

5. Lewis, H. D., *Contemporary British Philosophy*, p. 231.

commitment which is the characteristic religious situation. We have to take "models" from the empirical world and qualify them in a suitable manner to make them serviceable in speaking about God. In so doing, we discover that religious language is significantly different, or logically odd. When we describe God as the first cause, for example, we are not using cause in the same sense as when we say that cold is the cause of heat, or that my parents were the cause of my existence, or that the acorn is the cause of the oak. Nor are we saying that God is one in an endless series of causes strung out in time and space. The word *first* means not only first in a temporal series but prior to all possible causal stories. It is clear that by the time the theologian has finished with it, both *first* and *cause* have been qualified to give them a unique significance logically different from the normal use of these words. Failure to realize this involves us in such traditional difficulties as the child's "Who made God?" with the implication that there is no reason why the causal series should ever have a beginning or an end for that matter.

Another example, from his second book, is the problem of human freedom and divine omnipotence. The difficulties which arise, according to Professor Ramsey, spring from the inadequate qualifying of our *model*, in this case power. God is thought of after the analogy of a sergeant major or a battle-axe headmaster or a dominating prime minister, or an oriental potentate. But if the power of God is the worship he inspires (a quotation from A. N. Whitehead), if power is anchored in the characteristic religious situation which evokes worship and our free response to the power of the divine love, then there is no problem. "The problem of man's freedom and God's omnipotence is thus a pseudo-problem which disappears when the appropriate logical placings are given to each phrase."⁶ It is not intended to give here a full account of Dr. Ramsey's argument, or to make any critique of it. One may nevertheless wonder whether this solution to an age-old problem is too simple. Does it really do justice to the theist contention that God is Sovereign Creator and sustainer of the world, or to the facts of biology, psychology, and history? This is not to deny that Dr. Ramsey is right to go back to the religious situation in which the power of God is understood in a thoroughly Christian sense, but questions remain which can hardly be dubbed pseudo-problems.

The title of this article is "Much Ado About Words," and the attempt has been made to keep close to those modern treatments of theological and philosophical problems which obviously owe a great deal to philosophical analysis. There are two other books which deserve special mention because their starting point is somewhat different. One is H. D. Lewis, *Our Experience of God* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959), and the other is G. F. Woods, *Theological Explanation* (London: Nisbet, 1958). Lewis, while fully conversant with modern developments in philosophical analysis, treats the subject of religious language in much closer relationship to experi-

6. Ramsey, I. T., *Freedom and Immortality*, p. 59.

ence than is often the case these days. All that can be said here is that this is a significant book deserving special and detailed consideration. Woods, in a careful analysis of different kinds of theological explanation, insists that "the whole plurality of our explanatory methods springs from the fact that we are personal beings." The book is a sustained defence of the use of qualified personal analogies with reference to God.

Finally, mention must be made of P. F. Strawson's *Individuals* (London: Methuen, 1959). He distinguishes between descriptive metaphysics, which is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, and revisionary metaphysics, which is concerned to produce a better structure. He regards his book as belonging to the first category. It is clear, from what he says in this book and elsewhere, that Mr. Strawson's kind of philosophical analysis has a broader scope than is usually associated with this label. It may be the task of philosophy to correct errors due to linguistic confusion but "it would be itself a paradox to represent the *whole* task of philosophy as the correction of philosophical mistakes."⁷ We want to know, not only how our conceptual equipment works, but why it works as it does, but this is to ask "how the nature of our thinking is rooted in the nature of the world and in our own natures."⁸ Strawson also leaves the door open for the creative or constructive work of the philosophical imagination, in which we try to view the world through the medium of a different conceptual apparatus and speak about it in ways different from, though related to, those which we actually use. This is evidently not the kind of linguistic philosophy attacked by Mr. Gellner, which makes ordinary language and its use the final criterion.

And so the debate continues. Mr. Warnock insists that the restrictive iconoclasm of logical positivism is alien to the spirit of modern philosophy. The latter is only too eager to acknowledge that language has many uses, ethical, aesthetic, literary, and indeed metaphysical. There is no tendency to impose an arbitrary prohibition against using this or that particular kind of language. It would, however, be premature to assume from this that a revival of metaphysics is on the way, though clearly the atmosphere is changing, however slowly. Meanwhile, the theologian is still confronted with the problem of explaining what he means by the language he uses and showing the evidence on the basis of which theological affirmations are made.

7. *The Revolution in Philosophy*, p. 106.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 107.