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Philosophy as a Private Language

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Abstract

Philosophy (and its corollaries in the human sciences such as literary, social and political theory) is distinguished from other disciplines by a more thoroughgoing emphasis on the *a priori*. Philosophy makes no claims to predictive power; nor does it aim to conform to popular opinion (beyond ordinary intuitions as recorded by 'thought experiments'). Many philosophers view the discipline's self-exemption from 'real world' empirical testing as a non-issue or even an advantage, in allowing philosophy to focus on universal and necessary truths. This article argues otherwise. The non-instrumentality of philosophical discourse renders it into a collective private language, impairing the discipline's ability to judge the quality of its own output. The natural sciences and other technical disciplines offer the non-expert 'windows of scrutiny' into their respective methodologies, through numerous findings that can be easily and independently tested by amateurs. Such outside scrutiny provides a mechanism of external quality control, mitigating the internal effects of cognitive bias and institutionalised conformity upon the discourses of technical disciplines. In contrast, the conclusions of philosophy are not testable without in-depth knowledge of the methods by which they are arrived at; knowledge which can apparently only be gained through an extensive program of study, in philosophy. This epistemic circularity renders the program (even one of self-study) into a 'black box' in which the internal influence of cognitive biases and conformity effects cannot be independently assessed. The black box of philosophy is, in all relevant respects, analogous to the black box of the Cartesian mind that is the subject of Wittgenstein's private language argument.

Some of the famous leaders of German sociology who do their intellectual best, and do it with the best conscience in the world, are nevertheless, I believe, simply talking trivialities in high-sounding language, as they were taught. They teach this to their students, who are dissatisfied, yet who do the same. Karl Popper

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Introduction

The premise of this article is simple, if somewhat counter-intuitive. Philosophy is not a linguistic discourse. Put another way, if we were to gather together all texts ever produced in any meaningful language, most of philosophy would not qualify for inclusion. In essence, this article argues that philosophical discourse is semantically meaningless (and therefore not a linguistic practice) because it is a *collective private language*. The term 'private language' was famously employed by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) to describe a language incomprehensible to anyone other than its user, because its meanings are necessarily only knowable to that user. For example, it has been suggested that a private language may be constructed exclusively of names for the user's sensations, if those sensations have no behavioural (or other non-private) correlates. Such sensations would be 'private' in the sense that no one else would be able to know anything about them. Wittgenstein argued that the user of a private language would not be able to know if the language made sense. As the necessarily sole arbiter of what the expressions in the language mean, the user has no way to meaningfully correct the misuse of expressions in that language. In Wittgenstein's own words:

> In the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right?' (1953, §258)

Since a private language has no genuine criteria for distinguishing sense from nonsense, it is not a language at all (though it may bear a superficial resemblance to one, for instance in having a purported 'symbol system'). The private-language user may believe he is making sense, but has no way to substantiate that belief, even to himself. What is missing is a difference between *thinking* he is making sense, and *actually* making sense. The gap can be filled only by 'public' criteria which are accessible to other language-users, but someone can only believe he is speaking a *private* language if he believes it is not subject to such criteria.

The genesis of this article owes much to a paper entitled 'Sociology as a Private Language' by Arthur Brittan (1983). In it, he observes that the specialised technical vocabulary of sociology functions in some respects as a 'private language' whereby, as he put it, "Academics become locked into their own language games, which eventually are externalised and given shape in the texts [which] themselves are then defined as the arbitrators of . . . experience" (1983, 583). Brittan's argument was an informal one. In his own words, "I am not concerned with the felicities and ambiguities of linguistic philosophy or conceptual analysis" (1983, 581). Rather, he sought to warn in general

terms that by focusing on the exegesis of its own increasingly technical and self-referential literature, sociology risked losing perspective on the social issues it sought to illuminate. This article attempts to frame Brittan's thesis as a more formal, technical argument aimed at philosophy (or any purely discursive discipline, such as social, political or literary theory). Philosophers may not consider their discipline to be similarly at risk of epistemic isolation, because philosophy is *in essence* an exercise in textual exegesis. For example, a philosophical enquiry into the nature of truth would record intuitions about how the word 'truth' and related terms such as 'knowledge' and 'belief' are characteristically used, as a starting-point and guide to analysing the logical relations between concepts ostensibly revealed by such intuitions. Frank Jackson emphasises that ordinary intuitions play an essential role in the attempt to ground philosophical analysis in a larger, non-philosophical discourse:

> What then are the interesting philosophical questions that we are seeking to address when we debate the existence of free action and its compatibility with determinism, or about eliminativism concerning intentional psychology? What we are seeking to address is whether free action according to our ordinary conception, or something suitably close to our ordinary conception, exists and is compatible with determinism, and whether intentional states according to our ordinary conception, or something suitably close to it, will survive what cognitive science reveals about the operations of our brains. But how should we identify our ordinary conception? The only possible answer, I think, is by appeal to what seems to us most obvious and central about free action, determinism, belief, or whatever, as revealed by our intuitions about possible cases. (Jackson 1998, 31)

Jackson notes that the intuitions which concern philosophy are intuitions about 'possible cases'. For example, he points out that "what guides me in describing an action as free is revealed by my intuitions about whether various possible cases are or are not cases of free action" (1998, 31-32). The main device for testing such intuitions is the 'thought experiment', in which subjects are presented with a *narrative*, *statement* or *expression*, and asked for their considered reactions. Philosophy eschews 'real-world' experiments, which test intuitions about *actual* cases: intuitions that are immediate reactions to things *other than texts*. Thought experiments (though not necessarily misleading) offer a great deal of freedom in the choice of scenarios and variables determining the results; and this arbitrariness affords an entry for the private language analogy. Sceptics would argue that intuitions about possible cases have little relevance to how language operates in actual cases, where there is much less discretion and far greater complexity in the relevant

circumstances. Hence P. M. S. Hacker's pithy remark, "Thought -experiments are no more experiments than monopoly-money is money" (Hacker 2005, 27).

As there are various interpretations and criticisms of Wittgenstein's private language argument, it is necessary to both explain how it is construed for the purpose of this thesis, and defend the interpretation from charges of incoherence or vacuity. Some commentators regard Wittgenstein's remarks on private language as an empirical argument, in which a private language is impossible because the private-language user is unable to check the correctness of her language-use against public criteria (such as spatio-temporal objects, or the opinions of other language-users). On the face of it, such an interpretation seems overly sceptical; since if a language is deemed private because it refers solely to the user's mental content, then the same privacy would apply to mental content derived from sensory perception (thereby denying the language-user all cognitive access to public criteria). Employing such an interpretation, A. J. Ayer concluded that the private language argument fails to draw a meaningful distinction between private and public languages, since both languages derive their purported meanings from (in all relevant respects) the same kind of mental content:

> Let us examine this argument. A point to which Wittgenstein constantly recurs is that the ascription of meaning to a sign is something that needs to be justified: the justification consists in there being some independent test for determining that the sign is being used correctly; independent, that is, of the subject's recognition, or supposed recognition, of the object which he intends the sign to signify. His claim to recognize the object, his belief that it really is the same, is not to be accepted unless it can be backed by further evidence. Apparently, too, this evidence must be public: it must, at least in theory, be accessible to everyone. Merely to check one private sensation by another would not be enough. For if one cannot be trusted to recognize one of them, neither can one be trusted to recognize the other. But unless there is something that one is allowed to recognize, no test can ever be completed: there will be no justification for the use of any sign at all. (Ayer & Rhees 1954, 67-68)

Ayer views the private language argument as being grounded in radically sceptical assumptions (that we cannot ordinarily trust in the reliability of memory or the veracity of sense perception; hence we cannot use either to give meaning to a private language). He argues that given Wittgenstein's sceptical premise, the public-language user's test (intended to demonstrate the meaningfulness of her language via public criteria) is an empty gesture; since it relies on sensory perception and memory, just like the private language-user's test (which is deemed 'private' by virtue of that very reliance). In Ayer's

view, Wittgenstein's private language argument is nullified by its own scepticism, which appears to deny the possibility of any language. If Ayer is right, the argument that philosophy is a private language (in Wittgenstein's sense) would be inconsequential; since by Wittgenstein's account all language is private, in philosophy or outside it.

Ayer's interpretation raises a paradox. Ordinarily, if a language-user is able to pass the kinds of empirical test used to assess knowledge of a first or second language (such as telling the time, or ordering a meal in a restaurant), such demonstrations would justify the *provisional* assumption that she is using a public language. However, on Ayer's sceptical reading of Wittgenstein, such tests prove nothing of the sort; since the results are premised on the general reliability of the assessor's sense-perception and memory, either or both of which may be radically deceptive. This kind of extreme scepticism is incompatible with our ordinary criteria for linguistic meaningfulness, yet it is arguable that the sceptic's doubts cannot be *proven* false. Any belief in the reliability of such tests is conditional on the assumption that the believer has reliable cognitive access to the relevant public criteria. Sceptical doubts (of assumptions which underwrite the test, but which *necessarily* cannot be empirically verified) lead to Ayer's paradox. By merely assuming what the sceptic denies, one avoids the paradox, but at the cost of relying on unproven assumptions. On this article's interpretation of the private language argument, Wittgenstein does not offer *proof* against this kind of radical philosophical scepticism. Rather, as Stanley Cavell contends, Wittgenstein demonstrates that the *practical* implications of such scepticism are far more limited than may at first appear:

> Wittgenstein's appeal to criteria, though it takes its importance from the problem of scepticism, is not, and is not meant to be, a refutation of scepticism. Not, at least, in the form we had thought a refutation must take. That is, it does not negate the concluding thesis of scepticism, that we do not know with certainty of the existence of the external world (or of other minds). On the contrary, Wittgenstein, as I read him, rather affirms that thesis, or rather takes it as undeniable, and so shifts its weight. (Cavell 1999, 45)

Wittgenstein's argument shows (via Ayer's paradox) that such scepticism cannot *infect* our day-to-day lives. If we were to consistently entertain such doubts, they would undermine the 'bedrock assumptions' that justify the use of language:

> If the fact that we share, or have established, criteria is the condition under which we can think and communicate in language, then scepticism is a natural possibility of that condition; it reveals most perfectly the standing

threat to thought and communication, that they are only human, nothing more than natural to us. (Cavell 1999, 47)

The suspension of sceptical doubt about bedrock beliefs is *normative* for the ordinary language-user, as they are the criteria according to which language in general is found meaningful. We cannot do without these foundational assumptions, unless we intend to do away with language. On the above premise of the *normativity of bedrock beliefs*, Wittgenstein's private language argument need not be construed in a way that nullifies the private/public distinction, or render unreliable the ordinary criteria for linguistic meaningfulness.

The assumption of the normativity of bedrock beliefs upholds the ordinary 'common-sense' criteria for the presence of meaningful linguistic activity. These are the criteria that would, for example, be typically applied by linguists in testing for signs of genuine language-use in non-human species (such as chimpanzees or dolphins in the wild). Series of progressively more complex versions of the test are used to assess a child's grasp of a first language, or a learner's ability in a second language. According to the typical test criteria, the subject is deemed to be using a (public) language only if she is able to coordinate activities with other language-users, in collectively and physically interacting with the spatio-temporal environment (in such a way as to demonstrate essential features of language such as indexicality and generativity). An activity that fails the test would show no evidence of being a form of linguistic communication. Such an activity would (provisionally) be deemed to be, at most, a private (non-) language that runs into Ayer's paradox. It is crucial to note that as with any realistic test for the presence of language, the criteria are not reducible to a set of exhaustive and explicit conditions (and are therefore less susceptible to 'death by a thousand qualifications'). The above is only a broad *description*, not a *definition*, of what it takes to pass such a test. The actual criteria applied 'on the ground' would depend on the specific conditions and to a degree, the testers' intuitive judgement. Having outlined the verification criteria for a public language, this article shall now proceed to the main argument, which aims to show that philosophical discourse (in its characteristic form) *fails to meet such criteria*.

The Main Argument

Two English-speaking anthropologists visit an insular tribe that has its own unique language. In order to learn the tribal language, one anthropologist joins the tribe. The other camps outside, but finds she is unable to learn anything about the tribes' language (other than what it sounds like) by observing their behaviour. The tribe members appear to talk a great deal, but nothing they say seems to relate to the external world. Some years

pass, and the two anthropologists compare notes. The anthropologist who lived with the tribe now appears fluent in its language, but explains that he is unable to translate it easily as the vocabulary is extremely sophisticated, referring to complex issues within the tribe. It appears the only way to learn the language would be through 'immersion' by joining the tribe as he did. Applying the empirical criteria for the presence of linguistic communication, his colleague concludes there is no way to ascertain if her fluent partner has really mastered a new language, or has instead learned to utter a pattern of meaningless sounds. Like the private-language user, the fluent anthropologist is convinced that his newly acquired language makes sense; but is unable to demonstrate (even minimally) that it does. Despite internalising the norms of the 'language' through interacting with the tribe, he remains a private-language user. The above example illustrates that a language acquired through interaction with other 'language-users' can still be a (collective) private language. In the example, the non-fluent anthropologist refuses to conclude that her colleague has learned a language because a) she was unable to observe tribe members using the language to mutually interact with the environment (other than making sounds to one another), and b) her colleague is unable to teach the language to anyone else without effectively initiating them into the tribe (a process that would render questionable the initiates' objectivity in assessing the language's meaningfulness). At first sight, this may seem to be a psychological dilemma; in which the non-fluent anthropologist is concerned that by 'going native', her colleague is unable to offer a disinterested report on the tribe's language. The psychological dilemma is a genuine problem, but one that is in principle surmountable (on the assumption of the normativity of bedrock beliefs, which would rule out radical indeterminacy of translation) if the non-fluent anthropologist was able to learn the tribal language at 'second-hand': either by observing the tribe using it, or by having her fluent colleague translate it for her. The fact that she is able to do neither renders the language 'private': a more fundamental, philosophical problem. Language consists of semantics (the literal meanings of words) and pragmatics (what we do with words beyond conveying literal meanings, such as using pitch and volume to create a mood). In the case of the tribe's 'language', there is no apparent semantics. The language is not observed to refer to anything. Even if she were to master it via immersion in the tribe, the non-fluent anthropologist would not be able to substantiate if the 'language' makes sense (even to herself), or if she has simply learned to make noises that the tribe finds agreeable.

The parallels between the tribal language and philosophical discourse are striking. The latter is concerned primarily with abstractions and is highly self-referential, eschewing any form of instrumental language-use (such as the conduct of real-world experiments, or technical instruction beyond the manipulation of apparent symbols). In the course of their work, philosophers do not use language to mutually coordinate their interactions with the non-textual physical world. They simply 'talk' to one another, like the tribes-people in

the example. In this respect, it would be fruitful to contrast philosophical discourse with the instrumental language of technical disciplines; and to draw out the implications of that contrast. The jargon of science or for that matter, the legal profession, is largely incomprehensible to the person-in-the-street. But in different ways, the discourses of science and practical jurisprudence are subject to public scrutiny. Scientists make predictions that are often readily understood and testable by non-scientists. Despite the opacity of legal jargon, the practice of law is grounded in public standards of justice. Even in the humanities, disciplines such as history appeal to widely-shared criteria of documentary evidence. Such technical disciplines offer windows of scrutiny to the non-specialist, through numerous findings that can be easily and independently tested by outsiders.

This external scrutiny limits what technical disciplines can get away with in terms of semantic inconsistency, incoherence or vacuity. The discourses of such disciplines have to 'work' within a chain of causation or inference to produce results according to *publicly intelligible standards*; criteria which are not subject to the conformity effects of any single discipline (such effects in the larger epistemic milieu are not insignificant; but they are more likely to be diverse, dispersed, contested, and thereby attenuated). In contrast, the non-instrumentality of philosophical discourse leaves significant room for doubt as to which, if any, publicly intelligible standards apply in evaluating the meaningfulness of the discipline's output. Unlike scientific findings, the conclusions of philosophy are not testable without in-depth knowledge of the methods by which they are arrived at. The only apparent route to such knowledge is through an extensive structured program of study. But even if the program's students thereby come to believe that the discourse is meaningful, they are unable to show that it is *independently* of the complex process by which they came to that conviction (bearing in mind the potential psychological influence of cognitive biases and conformity effects within the program, even one of self-study). In other words, philosophy effectively fulfils conditions a) and b) from the example of the tribe. As with the 'language' of the tribe, philosophical discourse fails all empirical tests for signs of genuine linguistic activity, and has no demonstrable claim to being a form of public-language use. Unless and until it offers evidence to the contrary, the 'language' of such a discourse can be deemed to be at most, a private (non-) language.

Some may object that unlike the tribal language, which was known only to the tribe and its initiates, the vocabulary of philosophy uses mainly ordinary words from languages *known to be public*, such as English and German. Only a small part of the philosophical vocabulary consists of technical terms; most (if not all) of which have verbal definitions in the expressions of a public language. The difficulty with this objection is that even on the (very generous) assumption that philosophy can be conducted entirely in the vocabulary of a public language, the use of *expressions* from a public language does not

entail the *semantic* use of a public language. Even if the tribe in the example had 'borrowed' English words and used them grammatically, it does not entail that the words are being used in the same *sense* as they are used outside the tribe, or in any sense at all. In the absence of instrumental uses, the language lacks public criteria by which the meanings of its expressions can be fixed. Such a discourse does not mean anything *determinate*, which is as good as not meaning anything at all. This indeterminacy of meaning undermines the claim of semantic continuity between public languages and the language of philosophy. Such discontinuity justifies the treatment of philosophical discourse as a *self-contained* language in its own right (like the tribal language), subject to the same empirical tests for the presence of linguistic communication as any newly discovered 'language'.

It may be objected that many words in ordinary language (such as 'game' or 'democracy') are not very clear in their meanings either, but are usually regarded as meaningful. Why, then, are philosophical expressions singled out as meaningless for being vague? In most instances of non-philosophical discourse, procedures exist to clarify meanings *for a particular purpose* (either by cursory definition, or some form of ostension). Such procedures usually succeed in 'settling' what an expression means *for that purpose*, by reference (tacit or explicit) to the context of use. Through such procedures, words like 'game' or 'democracy' can take on determinate meanings in *specific* settings, even if the *general* meanings of such words are vague. Attempts at linguistic 'clarification' in philosophy are of a different character. They typically aim to arrive at 'once and for all' general definitions (of expressions such as 'knowledge' or 'truth') that leave no room for misapplication, and apply uniformly across a wide range of possible settings. Such attempts at clarification tend to generate even more disagreement on what is meant; the *opposite effect* to clarification in non-philosophical contexts. The non-instrumentality of philosophical discourse leaves room for only general meanings, which are often inherently vague to the point of being *effectively* meaningless. Some may further object that numerous non-instrumental uses of language outside philosophy (for example, some casual conversations or literary works) would fail the above-mentioned empirical tests for linguistic meaningfulness. Are such instances of everyday language-use meaningless? Compared to philosophical discourse as a whole, everyday non-instrumental uses of language tend to be brief and sporadic, and usually relate directly to issues in the larger discourse. Such ordinary uses are therefore less likely to deviate erratically from standard meanings (notwithstanding the gradual and systematic evolution of new meanings). On the other hand, philosophical discourse is characterised by *extended* non-instrumental language-use; a practice in which deviations from ordinary meanings may well go undetected; in the absence of real-world criteria embedded in circumstances of instrumental use. It is also arguable (though not essential to the preceding claim) that in ordinary examples of non-instrumental language-use, such

as casual banter, literary fiction or inspirational prose, there is less importance placed on precise literal meanings; in favour of a more general sense of 'meaningfulness' (with a relatively stronger emphasis on pragmatics, style and affective response than in instrumental language-use). Such creative non-instrumental uses tend to be more tolerant of deviations from standard meanings. Whenever meanings matter strongly, instrumental uses of language tend to come to the fore. Philosophy (particularly in the analytic tradition) claims to place great emphasis on semantic precision; yet in terms of non-instrumentality, its language has more in common with fiction or poetry than with the scientific genres that many philosophers seek to emulate.

Objections from Memory

Some may further object that even if it cannot be proven that everyday expressions in philosophy mean the same as they do in the larger discourse, we have good reason to think they *probably* do; because philosophers are hardly likely to forget the proper use of ordinary language while doing philosophy. So, it is argued, the bulk of philosophical discourse, the part in an uncontroversially public language, is meaningful (though technical expressions may contain obscurities, which can perhaps be weeded out). Such an objection ignores the philosophical adage that words only have meanings when *used* to mean something, in the context of the entire text in which they play a part. The expression 'true belief' means nothing when typed at random by a monkey (though expressions often have *conventional* meanings, the term 'meaning' is less misleading if understood as a verb than as a noun). In the preceding sentence, 'true belief' is not used meaningfully, but one would only know that by reading the entire sentence. If this paragraph were used in the same way, one would have to read more than the paragraph to know it was meaningless. The key issue before us is whether philosophical discourse as a whole functions in the same way as such a paragraph. On the face of it, such a suggestion seems absurd, but let us examine it; with the help of a variation on John Searle's Chinese Room Argument (1980). A boy is raised from birth in an empty windowless room. He is taught a non-private language (such as German) by the use of complex syntactical rules, without the objects the language refers to. Solely by applying the rules, he is able to converse fluently and appropriately in German (in the same way as an AI computer); apparently displaying the same intuitions as an ordinary German language-user in the confines of the room. Release him into the world outside, and it becomes apparent he does not understand a word of German. He cannot use the language to refer to anything. While in captivity, he was merely 'using' German (albeit non-randomly) in the same way that the typewriting monkey produced the expression 'true belief'. The boy was not using German *meaningfully*, even though he was using it *grammatically*. Most philosophers agree that the central task of philosophy is the discursive elucidation of concepts. As such

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philosophers can conduct their business quite conventionally in an empty room, since their discipline is governed by the same criteria as the boy above; the logical properties of language bounded by ordinary human intuitions (albeit real ones as opposed to the boy's 'virtual' intuitions, that nevertheless produce the same results). Science, and any other technical discipline, art or craft, would grind to a halt under such conditions.

Let us grant that philosophy is conducted entirely in the words and grammar of a public language, such as German. Even so, it can never be established that philosophers are using German any more meaningfully than the boy in the empty room. After all, both the philosophers and the boy are confined to the same criteria for 'correct' language-use. If the boy's use of language is meaningless, why is philosophical discourse deemed meaningful? How are philosophers remembering to 'mean the same thing' when using ordinary words in philosophy? Is it not the way the boy is remembering to use words 'the right way' in the empty room? The problem with the objection from memory is that it is simply beside the point. The crux of the problem is the absence of criteria by which to make a meaningful selection from memory. Before memory can come into play, the context has to exist in which it makes sense to say that one is remembering to use a word with 'the same meaning' as it is used in ordinary discourse. In the case of the boy, that context is missing and the criteria he employs is thereby under-determinative of meaning. By the same token, is the context not missing in philosophy? Such a possibility is raised by Stanley Rosen:

> We do know what we are talking about (and how to correct errors when we make them) in ordinary language; we cease to be talking about anything in particular when we shift to a purely formal language, and so it becomes literally true that we do not know what we are talking about, unless of course we are talking about the symbols and syntax of the formal language itself. But this, however impressive from a technical standpoint, is not very useful either to the average citizen or to the philosopher. (Rosen 1995, 45)

The language of the boy in the room and by the same token, the language of philosophy, is such a formal language: in which there is a disconnect between the syntax of the formal language and the semantic content of the ordinary language that the formal language claims continuity with. There are limits to how novel a situation can be before the use of certain words simply makes no sense, even if they *appear* to be used correctly. To indulge in a metaphor, can one remember to use a fishing rod 'the ordinary way' in a desert? There is a sense in which even in the desert, one can go through the motions of fishing 'the ordinary way' (for example, by holding the rod in the typical fashion), or even do it 'the wrong way' (perhaps holding the rod by the narrow end). But it would be

less misleading to simply reply 'there is no ordinary way to use a fishing rod in the desert, because you don't fish in a desert'. Philosophers could certainly *go through the motions* of 'correcting' one another's use of ordinary words based on the results of 'thought experiments', as the desert fishermen could for one another's use of fishing rods (and the boy for his own use of German). But the ability to check one another's use of everyday language in this way, from *memory alone*, does nothing to *validate* the claim that everyday words are used in their original sense in philosophy. Of course, meaningful discussions can be held in an empty room; but unlike them, philosophy seminars are not simply *ad hoc* departures from instrumental language-use. Philosophy is *systemically* and *consistently* isolated from instrumental discourse, from the concrete circumstances that give words determinate meanings.

Some may argue that this article applies double standards. It contends that empirical tests for linguistic meaningfulness are premised on the suspension of sceptical doubts (for example, of the knowledge of other minds, the veracity of sense-perception, the reliability of memory, or the determinacy of translation) that would undermine belief in the reliability of such tests (and thereby, of the meaningfulness of language in general). On the other hand, this paper appears to entertain sceptical doubts when it comes to the meaningfulness of philosophical discourse. At least the philosophical sceptic is consistent in arguing that some of the assumptions underpinning belief in the meaningfulness of *any* language are empirically untestable. Does this article apply the same scepticism *selectively* to philosophical discourse and not to ordinary language? The short answer is, no. Quite the contrary, this paper applies to philosophical discourse all the bedrock assumptions that underwrite ordinary, public language-use. The difference is that ordinary languages have no trouble passing empirical tests for the presence of meaningful linguistic communication. On the other hand, the suspension of radical scepticism does nothing to legitimise philosophy's claim to semantic meaning; because even then, the discipline would fail every reliable test for meaningful linguistic discourse. Even if philosophers have *perfect* memories, and all words in philosophy are taken from public languages and used in their *original* sense, it would not matter. The memory of how to use an ordinary expression is of little use in an extra-ordinary setting, and using the expression in its 'original' sense in such a setting can still constitute a misuse of the expression. In ordinary settings, real-world empirical criteria would filter out such misuses (for example, someone picking up a fork when asked for a 'spoon'), but in philosophy there are no real-world tests for the correct use of language. There are only logico-grammatical tests governed by 'thought experiments'; because philosophy does not use language to do things in the physical world (other than manipulate apparent symbols), nor can philosophy demonstrate sufficient continuity with public languages (beyond using the same words in the same order) to ride on the latter's claim to meaning. At some point, doubt ceases to be sceptical and becomes quite legitimate.

Public Languages

It may be worthwhile to briefly re-cap the main point before going on to address related issues. The problem of philosophy's linguistic isolation cannot be resolved by simply doing philosophy entirely in ordinary language, a practice which is claimed to ensure continuity between public languages and philosophical discourse. The proposed ordinary language solution fails to address the central problem, philosophy's lack of real-world empirical accountability. Ordinary language philosophy is no defence against creeping semantic vacuity. As illustrated by the example of the boy in the empty room, the semantic content of ordinary language is *inextricably bound up* with the real-world activities in which the language is characteristically employed. As mentioned earlier, even if the tribe in the first example had 'borrowed' English words and used them grammatically, the anthropologists would still not know if the words were being used meaningfully in the absence of such activities. The use of ordinary language in philosophy does not guarantee that the language is used in 'ordinary ways' (a charge that is, ironically, often levelled at the discipline by ordinary language philosophers). The problem is not the language of philosophy *per se*, but philosophical methodology. The crux of the difficulty is what philosophy *does to language*, in disconnecting it from empirically-grounded practices. To attempt to philosophise in ordinary language is to use everyday expressions in ways that are liable to *misuse*. Even on the face of it, the ordinary language solution is impracticable (aside from the problem of defining 'ordinary language'), since technical terms are essential to any sophisticated research program. Such terms are labels for complex arguments, positions or descriptions that would be too cumbersome to spell out with every mention (if, in the case of philosophy, they can be fully spelled out at all). Without recourse to a technical vocabulary, any research effort would be severely curtailed. If this article's main point is taken on board, there is no prospect of 'business as usual' for philosophy; with or without a technical vocabulary. Philosophy cannot break out of its epistemic isolation without ceasing to be philosophical.

Most philosophers would independently concur that certain arguments are invalid, or would independently define philosophical terms in the same way. Does this agreement in language-use not present evidence for consistent semantic content? Since philosophy uses many everyday expressions, their ordinary senses can underwrite some agreement on philosophical usages or definitions, but such agreement does not work in the opposite direction. Agreement on the definitions or logico-grammatical properties of expressions does not entail a consensus on what those expressions mean. For example, even if we all agree to stipulate that games are 'competitive recreational activities', there is still plenty

of room for disagreement on what 'competitive', 'recreational' and 'activity' mean, *ad infinitum*. Philosophy aims to capture the real-world meanings of expressions through descriptive definitions, but real meanings are notoriously under-determined by such definitions; leaving plenty of room for contention as to which definition best captures the full meaning. It is quite likely that for most expressions, no definition does; because most words are not learned via definition, and we are rarely called upon (outside philosophy) to define a term exhaustively:

> The ability to speak a natural language is not grounded in rules but rather in the innate mastery of equivocity. And this in turn is not grounded in the mastery of syntax but in the ability to see what needs to be said as well as to discern what it is that someone means when he or she says something. All rules are a posteriori or ad hoc. The philosophy of language, very far from explaining how we speak meaningfully, is itself a product of our ability to see what ought to be said. I would myself go one step farther and say that there is, in principle, no explanation of how we see what we or others mean, if to explain is to analyze, that is, to break unities or syntheses into their component parts, and these again into simpler elements, until we arrive at something that resists analysis and that exhibits easily intelligible properties which we believe can be transferred upward through the increasingly complex levels of structure until we arrive at the totality or whole. (Rosen 1995, 46)

In most everyday contexts, a cursory definition will do for a particular purpose, and that is probably all that can be expected for most words we commonly use. It is quite likely that most expressions are *generally* vague (though they often take on more specific applications on particular occasions of use). Language is not useless for being vague. For example, it is often easier to build consensus around a vague expression than a precise one, and use specific occasions of use to negotiate a more nuanced meaning. Precision is not an end in itself. The prevalence and persistence of philosophical disagreement on semantics is an indication that a high degree of *pathological* indeterminacy (not the useful kind in ordinary language) is systemic to the discipline's discourse. This is hardly surprising, given that philosophy is unable to fix meanings by the usual method of instrumental use.

Detractors may object that there is no definitive test for identifying language. So who is to say if philosophy is not a (perhaps unorthodox, but meaningful) linguistic practice? After all, experts still debate whether the ascription of language-use to non-human animals or computer programs is literal or merely anthropomorphic. Bees indicate the location of honey to other bees by doing a 'dance', which has been decoded into English

instructions. Is the dance a language? Some philosophers argue that it would be futile to attempt to identify the necessary and sufficient properties of language. Wittgenstein famously wrote "Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena 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" (1953, §65). Even if Wittgenstein is right, there is still a threshold beyond which something is not a language. A can of beans is not a language, in the absence of evidence that it is being used as one. For many concepts, the threshold for whether the concept is instantiated or not is relatively clear. In the case of language, it seems reasonable to posit that the threshold between a private (personal or collective) language and a public language is marked by the respective absence or presence of activities in the physical world that demonstrate characteristic features of language, beyond apparent symbolic manipulation. In more accurate terminology, the relevant threshold is between a private or collective *non-language* and a public *language-candidate*. Language-candidates are the sorts of activities that either qualify as languages, or show enough language-like features to qualify for evaluation as potential languages. Once the threshold into language-candidacy is passed, there may be contention or uncertainty as to whether candidates display all the features of language, whether the ascription of language is anthropomorphic, or whether the language contains substantial ambiguity or nonsense. Language-candidates may fail enough tests to be ultimately disqualified as languages, but non-candidates are not even in the running. A can of beans, birdsong, or music would ordinarily not qualify as language-candidates. The bee-dance probably does, since it displays some features of language in communicating the location of honey, but may fail further tests for the status of a language. This article contends that philosophical discourse does not qualify as a language-candidate; because philosophy (like music) fails to provide sufficient relevant data to qualify for evaluation of its status as a linguistic discourse.

A sceptic may object that this article is self-contradictory, since it uses philosophy to argue that philosophical discourse is meaningless. Such an objection illustrates the fallacy of composition, that the part is representative of the whole. Some philosophical works do make sense (hopefully including this article), and no doubt there are parts of philosophical discourse that make more sense than other parts. However, a collection of disparate texts differs from a systematic research program, which aims to make cumulative epistemic progress by a division of academic labour across time. As a research program, philosophy makes no sense; but among its disparate writings, one may find works that are interesting or informative. The more a philosophical text cites other texts from philosophy, the less likely it is to make sense. The greater the division of philosophical labour, the higher the likelihood of semantic vacuity as the exclusively non-instrumental use of language is extended further across time and a greater

multiplicity of authors. Most philosophers would probably greet this paper's argument with extreme scepticism. They may contend that if philosophy made no sense, there should have been a point where 'the penny dropped' among its practitioners. Students would be deserting philosophy in droves, spreading the word about its semantic vacuity. There are several probable reasons why this has not occurred. The foremost reason may be the fallacy of composition. Much of the vocabulary of philosophy consists of ordinary, everyday expressions. Most students begin philosophy by reading introductory texts in plain language. It all appears to make sense, and probably does in the initial stages. Beginners naturally assume that the part is representative of the whole, and many fail to notice the creeping vacuity as they plough onward through vast expanses of non-instrumental discourse. Even though substantial cynicism towards philosophy exists among outsiders, most lack the conceptual tools to explain their dissatisfaction to philosophers (who generally ignore the views of non-philosophers anyway, as stemming from ignorance and prejudice). Many students and scholars do abandon the discipline, but their criticisms of it may be ascribed to 'not getting' philosophy, or resentment at not being 'successful' at it. There may be structural conformity effects within academic philosophy, motivating its members to defend the discipline against fundamental criticism. A full discussion of the reasons for philosophy's lack of reflexivity on its own semantic vacuity would be a research program in its own right, beyond the scope of this article and the expertise of this author. The (somewhat speculative) reasons above are offered only as tentative indications for further research.

Conclusion

In what sense, then, can there be 'progress' in philosophy? From the arguments above, it follows that the discipline in its characteristic form can make no epistemic progress; in the form of new information conveyed in propositions, arrived at via an extended exercise in non-instrumental discursive 'reasoning'. It may be argued that there are other ways in which philosophy can make 'progress'. A small minority of philosophers may contend that the status of philosophical discourse as a language is beside the point, because philosophy is really a quasi-linguistic activity which is parasitic upon language, but aims at extra-linguistic, ineffable insights. Some may regard Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* as a text of this kind, especially given his concluding remark in that book:

> My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (Wittgenstein 1961, 6.54)

Perhaps Wittgenstein meant 'nonsensical' in a somewhat restricted logical sense, but the quote does give the flavour of the philosophical perspective in question. Philosophers who take such a view of their discipline are in the position of the private linguist, who is convinced that he is engaged in a worthwhile pursuit, but is unable to substantiate his conviction (other than by initiating others into his pursuit). There are many competing practitioners (philosophical, esoteric and religious) making the same claim, which offers no criteria for choosing between them. Taking a 'leap of faith' into one of these disciplines entails an opportunity cost (which for certain cult-like disciplines can be extremely high), and the decision cannot be described as a rational one. Other philosophers may accept that philosophical discourse is a private language, but find nothing wrong in this. After all, there are private elements to meaning; grey areas of indeterminate, half-formed or evolving subjective content (For example, in the subconscious). Certain linguistic practices, such as psychotherapy or poetry, are a way of exploring these grey areas; a task which calls for tolerating the first-person perspective in all its inarticulateness. Could philosophy be one such practice? The difficulty with this view is that it fails to differentiate philosophy from other practices that explore the first-person perspective. One could call psychotherapy, poetry, art, meditation, or day-dreaming 'philosophy', but these are no threat to this article's position and are to be judged by their own internal standards (which are, in many cases, highly contentious). The arguments of this article are aimed solely at discourses that claim to arrive at conventional propositional truths exclusively via the Socratic Method.

Then there are philosophers who would claim that this article attacks a straw man, an idealised or out-dated caricature of philosophy as pure *a priori* reasoning. They would argue that much of (particularly contemporary) philosophy has an admixture of real-world empirical testing (for example, the new school of 'experimental philosophy'). Such an objection suffers an analogous flaw to the above critique from the first-person perspective; they fail to differentiate philosophy from other disciplines that bridge the theoretical and the empirical (such as physics or psychology). Philosophy under such a description would be, at most, a generalised variety of theoretically-informed science (or scientifically-informed theory). This author is in full agreement with the claim that there is, at least *in practice*, no such thing as pure *a priori* 'reasoning'; but if this paper is attacking a straw man, it is one that is very much alive in most philosophy departments. A significant minority of philosophers, while not taking the route of esoterism, claim to do philosophy for purely aesthetic reasons. For them, philosophy does not aim at truth of any kind, ineffable or otherwise. It is simply done for the pleasure it gives, perhaps for the elegance and beauty of its ideas. Such an approach is left unscathed by this article's arguments, but it is not an approach that can claim to make an intellectual contribution in the form of new insights or information. The majority of philosophers regard their discipline as one aimed at conventional propositional truth, arrived at exclusively via

discursive reasoning. For them, it matters that the language of philosophy makes sense, since it aims at making true statements about reality. By a process of elimination, there appears to be only one way in which philosophy can be claimed to make meaningful progress, and that is in a negative sense. By delineating the boundaries of meaningful discourse, the discipline may be informative in a tangential way. Only by attempting to do philosophy can one learn which problems are philosophical in nature, and therefore best left alone if philosophy is semantically meaningless.

One significant practical implication of this article's thesis is the impossibility of philosophical expertise; by which philosophy 'experts' can claim intellectual authority by virtue of their philosophical qualifications (this may have implications for the presence of philosophers, at least *qua* philosophy experts, in committees on ethics or public policy). Stanley Fish has written eloquently on this issue, in a statement which also sums up the main point of this article:

> Now it could be said (and some philosophers will say it) that the person who deliberates without self-conscious recourse to deep philosophical views is nevertheless relying on or resting in such views even though he is not aware of doing so. To say this is to assert that doing philosophy is an activity that underlies our thinking at every point, and to imply that if we want to think clearly about anything we should either become philosophers or sit at the feet of philosophers. But philosophy is not the name of, or the site of, thought generally; it is a special, insular form of thought and its propositions have weight and value only in the precincts of its game. Points are awarded in that game to the player who has the best argument going ("best" is a disciplinary judgment) for moral relativism or its opposite or some other position considered "major." When it's not the game of philosophy that is being played, but some other — energy policy, trade policy, debt reduction, military strategy, domestic life — grand philosophical theses like "there are no moral absolutes" or "yes there are" will at best be rhetorical flourishes; they will not be genuine currency or do any decisive work. (Fish 2011)

Having said that, it does not follow that tools or skills developed in philosophy (such as logical or linguistic analysis) cannot be usefully applied elsewhere; for example in the contributions of the philosophers Daniel Dennett (1996) and Jerry Fodor (Fodor & Palmarini 2010) to the scientific understanding of neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory. Philosophers often have insightful things to say, but the question before us is whether such insights result from doing philosophy, or simply from the exercise of some or all of

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the general intellectual virtues. After all, philosophers are people; and some people are wise and insightful. But they are not so by virtue of doing philosophy.

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