

**COERCIVE THEORIES OF MEANING**  
**OR**  
**WHY LANGUAGE SHOULDN'T MATTER (SO MUCH) TO PHILOSOPHY**

By  
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**1. Quote/Unquote**

Philosophers like other people often have a weakness for quiz-shows. And like the crew in the *Hunting of the Snark*, they are all of them fond of quotations<sup>1</sup>. So I begin with a quotation and a question. The quotation comes from a famous - indeed a 'superstar' - text. But *which* text? Which famous writer indicted these lines?

The purpose of the universal jargon was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of logical empiricism, but to make other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when the universal jargon had been adopted for all and the metaphysically infected terminology forgotten, a metaphysical thought - that is a thought diverging from what logical empiricism regarded as genuinely thinkable - should be *literally* unthinkable, at least in so far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a logical empiricist could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was to be done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and stripping such words as remained of unorthodox 'metaphysical' meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever. To give an example, the word 'free' would still exist in the universal jargon but it could only be used in such statements as 'This dog is free from lice' or 'This field is free from weeds'. It could not be used in the old sense of 'metaphysically free' in which 'freedom' suggests something like the liberty of indifference.

Where does this come from? It is about the positivists obviously, and the reference to universal jargon will suggest to the *cognoscenti* that it is Neurath that the author principally has in mind. The style suggests an intellectual autobiography, but the tone is a little too acerbic to come from a former devotee of the sect. It might be Russell, but Russell wrote against the positivists when they were very much a going concern, and his writings are not

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<sup>1</sup> "Friends, Romans, and countrymen, lend me your ears!"  
 (They were all of them fond of quotations:  
 So they drank to his health, and they gave him three cheers,  
 While he served out additional rations).  
 Lewis Carrol, *The Hunting of the Snark*, Fit the Second,

couched in the historical mode. It is not mannered and mandarin enough to be written by Quine. The obvious alternative is Popper. Yet the piece lacks the *faux naïf* blandness of *Unended Quest*. It might be culled from *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, which includes a critique of positivist dogma in the notes, but in that case one would expect it to be written in the present tense. After all, in the early forties most of the logical positivists were still alive, and still true believers. Neurath had escaped the Nazis in an open boat, and the universal jargon was still one of his pet projects<sup>2</sup>. Give up? Then how about this?

From the beginning we shall teach children Newspeak - purged completely of crimethink or anything that can lead to crimethink - as the language of Ingsoc which has been historically provided. Each child will thus be 'trained' to start with a simplified Newspeak and gradually advance to the Newspeak of adults. ... The child does not learn a primitive version of Newspeak from which the grown-ups' Newspeak derives; the child learns a 'poorer' Newspeak which is gradually enriched.

Well that's easy! The words 'Newspeak' and 'crimethink' are a dead giveaway. Obviously this passage comes from Orwell's *1984*. Some unusually frank Party member - probably O'Brien - is expounding party policy. The idea is to induce ideological conformity by means of linguistic reform.

## 2. Neurath and Newspeak.

Actually you would be wrong. But I must confess that I have cheated. Though both quotations are genuine, and both are derived from eminent authors, both have been doctored to suit my purposes. It is the first not the second that comes from *1984*. I have simply substituted 'universal jargon' for 'Newspeak', 'logical empiricism' for 'Ingsoc' and made one or two other minor changes. In the original it reads as follows:

The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when the Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and the Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought - that is a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc - should be literally unthinkable, at least in so far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party Member could properly wish to express,

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<sup>2</sup> He died in December 1945 of a heart attack.

while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was to be done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever. To give an example, the word 'free' still existed in Newspeak but it could only be used in such statements as 'This dog is free from lice' or 'This field is free from weeds'. It could not be used in the old sense of 'intellectually free' or 'politically free' since political and intellectual freedom no longer existed even as concepts. (Orwell, 2008: 312-313.)

To be precise this extract comes from the Appendix in which Orwell, in his authorial persona, explains the principles of Newspeak. What about the second passage? This is vintage Neurath, from his famous essay 'Protokollsätze'. In fact the passage occurs shortly after the famous simile of the ship of knowledge. All I had to do was switch 'Newspeak' for 'universal jargon', and 'crimethink' for 'metaphysics' and the task was almost done. The unadulterated text reads as follows:

From the beginning we shall teach children the universal jargon - purged completely of metaphysics - as the language of unified science which has been historically provided. Each child will thus be 'trained' to start with a simplified universal jargon and gradually advance to the universal jargon of adults. ... The child does not learn a primitive universal jargon from which the grown-ups' universal jargon derives; the child learns a 'poorer' universal jargon which is gradually enriched. (Neurath, 1983: 82-83)

Note how easy it was to make the switch. By swapping a word here and a phrase there I am able to convert Orwell's account of the linguistic policies of the Party into a description of Neurath's program. It was a hostile description to be sure, but not, I think, an inaccurate one. By swapping a phrase here and a word there I was able to convert Neurath's modest proposals for linguistic reform into a Party manifesto for the principles of Newspeak. And the reason is obvious - the two programs are indeed alike<sup>3</sup>. Like the devotees of Ingsoc Neurath looked forward to a future in which heretical thoughts - metaphysical thoughts as he supposed - could not be expressed. He had his personal *Index verborum prohibitorum*

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<sup>3</sup> Could there be a causal link between logical positivism and the Party's linguistic program? Perhaps. For at the end of the War at the about he time he was writing *1984* Orwell had made a friend of 'Freddie' Ayer. See Ayer, 1977: 286-87, Orwell, 1971:178, 235 and Rogers, 1999: 193. Maybe Orwell derived some inspiration from their conversations.

(including such empty metaphysical concepts as 'truth' and 'capital'<sup>4</sup>) and it was his ambition to foist these prohibitions on the world at large (Neurath, 1973: 7, Neurath, 1983: 217). Or rather, he hoped to make explicit prohibitions unnecessary. Once the universal jargon had become truly universal, only those delving back into bygone superstitions would have occasion to consciously curb their tongues. For the rest, metaphysical words would not even be known to be rejected. In Utopia, metaphysics would not even be an option. So too in Oceania. Once Newspeak had become universal, crimethink would be an impossibility and crimestop redundant except for historians. (And who needs them anyway?)

Of course there are differences. Neurath did not want to *force* anyone to speak the universal jargon, unless perhaps they wanted to publish a paper in *Erkenntnis* or to write a book for the *International Encyclopaedia of Unified Science*. In that case his aversion to 'dangerous words' could drive even his fellow-positivists to distraction. Feigl, for instance, complained bitterly to Carnap about Neurath's 'senile terminophobic objections' to the word 'explanation' which were causing quite a problem since scientific explanations were what the proposed book was supposed to be about. After a year of frustrating discussions, Feigl withdrew from the project. (Reisch, 2005: 205.) Officially of course, Neurath was an opponent of persecution and was actually researching the suppression of the Huguenots when the Nazis nearly caught him in Holland. Persuasion not force was supposed to be the instrument in ideological controversy. Nonetheless although officially in favour of toleration, he was not all that tolerant in practice. 'One should allow all opinions to be expressed, even the most absurd ones', observed Schlick 'the progress of science will look after selection.' Neurath was apparently 'furious' when told about this attitude. (See Neider's memoir in Neurath, 1973: 47.) Of course, unlike the tyrants of 1984, Neurath had a theoretical as well as a political rationale for his program. The reason metaphysical talk was to be suppressed or at least superseded was not just because it was politically inconvenient (though Neurath did believe that metaphysics was the support of reaction<sup>5</sup>) but because it was *meaningless*. Metaphysical terms were literally gibberish, words without content (or without genuine

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<sup>4</sup> Neurath seems to have thought that if we once allowed talk about word-world relations to make sense, we would all start persecuting each other in the name of some 'absolute' truth. To avert this catastrophe, he attacked Tarski and Carnap for venturing to suggest to suggest that 'the cat is on the mat is true if and only if the cat is on the mat. See Reisch, 2005: ch. 10, for the Neurath/Carnap controversy and Mancuso, 2008, for Neurath's debate with Tarski's henchwoman Kokoszynska. God alone knows what Neurath had against the concept of capital, but this particular terminological aversion must have made it rather difficult explaining to his Marxist comrades what it was that they were all against.

<sup>5</sup> In Neurath's defense it is worth pointing out that Austrian reaction was certainly something to worry about. See Hacohen, 2000, especially ch. 7. But one has to ask was it *really* a sensible tactic to beat the semi-fascist Christian-Socials by trying to promote a language in which their theology could not even be expressed?

content). The Party on the other hand appears to have regarded the democratic heritage of Oldspeak as all too dangerously meaningful. That's why it had to be done away with.

Nevertheless the resemblance is a little too close for comfort. The tactic of consigning the utterances of one's opponents to the linguistic garbage-bin and then enforcing - sorry *encouraging* - the use of a language in which deviant thoughts, or pseudo-thoughts cannot even be expressed smacks of totalitarianism. This was noted at the time. Neurath's universal jargon was lampooned by the pragmatist Horace Kallen as 'Logpu', a soubriquet modelled on 'OGPU', one of the many acronyms for the Soviet secret police. (Kallen, 1940, 1946a, 1946b, 1946c and 1946d and Reisch, 2005: 167-190.) An obviously nettled Neurath defended himself on the grounds that the universal jargon represents what is common to humankind when we are not tormenting ourselves with metaphysical absurdities. He was not imposing a new unity on humanity but appealing to that stock of concepts on which we are already agreed. Since the universal jargon is the language of the people, Neurath cannot be a totalitarian for suggesting that we stick to it. (Neurath, 1983:233-234.) But apart from the dubious anthropology (Are there no languages which are, so to speak, *metaphysical all the way down?*) this ignores the charge that Neurath takes a rather tough line with those who wish to transcend the language of common-sense. In a rational debate they are not to be heard since, according to him, they have nothing to say worth hearing.

### 3. Totalitarian Tactics in Philosophy

Well so what? Let us suppose that there *is* something rather nasty about Neurath's philosophy. Despite himself he had totalitarian tendencies<sup>6</sup>. But nobody believes in Neurath nowadays. At best he has some slight reputation as a fallibilist about the given, as a patron saint of physicalism and as the inventor of a famous simile. So why should we care?

Because Neurath is not alone. *Many* philosophers in the empiricist and analytic traditions display just this kind of nastiness. Central to their philosophies is some kind of Newspeak, often a restricted fragment of natural language, together with the claim that nothing that cannot be expressed in this language really makes sense. The claim is the

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<sup>6</sup> Given the rise of Nazism and the disastrous failure of his political projects, Neurath began to wonder whether he and his comrades had not made some kind of mistake. Scientific philosophy in the service of enlightenment values had not proved to be much of a winner. 'I often ask me to what extent we too are responsible too for all that happened, by doing something or failing to do something .. e.g. the supporting of totalitarian habits as such and so on'. (Neurath to Carnap 25/9/43, quoted in Reich, 2005, 197.) Unfortunately he identified totalitarian habits with Carnap's propensity for post-Tarskian semantics. The idea that there was something a little self-defeating about trying to support (among other things) free speech by constricting the bounds of language does not seem to have occurred to him. Of course, his prohibitions were futile because he lacked the power to enforce them, but that only makes his project more absurd, not less totalitarian.

consequence of a *coercive theory of meaning*, that is a theory whose principal purpose is to dismiss the views of a large class of ideological opponents as inherently meaningless. (That way they do not have to be argued with piecemeal but can be dealt with *en bloc*.) Not all proponents of a coercive theory of meaning want their Newspeak (and nothing else) to be taught to the populace at large, but all of them insist that there are no philosophic or other truths that cannot be couched in this language. (Though we must add the proviso that *some* philosophers in this tradition do not believe that there *are* any genuine philosophic truths.) Even those who take a lax view about the language of the vulgar demand that the language of the learned should be subject to philosophical censorship. (Though again, we must add the proviso that sometimes this censorship takes the form of *therapy*. It is not that you are not *allowed* to use certain words, or to use them in certain ways. Indeed the temptation to do so can be irresistible. But *if* you give in to the bewitchments of the intelligence and start to misuse language, a kindly therapist will come along and *talk* to you until you decide to stop<sup>7</sup>.)

Ian Hacking's book, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy* (1975), manages to miss this simple point in a truly spectacular fashion. Again and again, he passes over the principal and declared purpose of successive theories of meaning - to prove that the people you don't like are talking nonsense. From Hobbes to Wittgenstein, through Dummett<sup>8</sup>, Rorty<sup>9</sup> and the later Putnam<sup>10</sup> the principal (if not the only) purpose theories of meaning has been as polemical weapons. That's why language matters to philosophy - you can use your

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<sup>7</sup> Memoirs suggest that sessions with the therapist could be rather traumatic, but then you often have to be be cruel to be kind.

<sup>8</sup> The Dummett I discuss in this paper is mostly the Dummett of *Truth and Other Enigmas*, on which I was raised and which I know best. The living Dummett has continued to develop since the seventies but his basic approach to philosophy has not changed and it is his basic approach that I believe to be wrong.

<sup>9</sup> Rorty regularly tries to rule out the ideas that he dislikes as meaningless, though in his case we have not so much a *theory* (or even a set of criteria) as a propensity to propagandistic blather. 'The idea that the world decides which descriptions are true can no longer be given a clear sense' he says on the basis of no argument whatsoever. (Rorty, 1989: 5). But then he thinks that *argument* as traditionally conceived is out of place. After all, he might lose. 'My strategy will be to try to make the vocabulary in which these objections are phrased look bad thereby changing the subject, rather than granting the objector his choice of weapons' (Rorty, 1989: 44). Thus Rorty is much more of a soft totalitarian than Neurath, who at least had a theory of meaninglessness to back his prohibitions.

<sup>10</sup> Like many in the Antipodes, I am a big fan of the early Putnam; less so of his later self, The early Putnam thought it a mistake to suppose that you could dissolve the traditional problems of philosophy with the aid of the theory of meaning (Putnam, 1975, 273). Rather, he used the theory of meaning to liberate us from the conceptual prison of verificationism, enabling us to talk about electrons and emotions as opposed to dial readings and behaviors (1975: 1-32). The later Putnam used the theory of meaning to confine us within the prison of 'internal realism' (the anti-realism that dare not speak its name) by 'demonstrating' that obviously intelligible possibilities - such as being a deluded brain in a vat - are really *unintelligible* (Putnam, 1978: 126). The early Putnam was a conceptual liberator, the later Putnam a conceptual censor. Hence his addiction to Wittgenstein and James. *How are you fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!*

theory of how it works as a stick to beat the opposition. And that's why (if we revert to the sexist idiom of J.L.Austin [1979: 192, 284]) it is the concept of *meaninglessness* that wears the trousers in so many semantic theories. (Just as it is what *can't* be expressed that is really important in the design of Newspeak.) In the last chapter of his book Hacking wonders rather plaintively what thread connects the linguistic theories of the philosophers he discusses, ignoring the big greasy rope that binds them all together. The philosopher whose theory of meaning is, so to speak *disinterested* - *not* designed to do someone down - is a rare bird (though thankfully such philosophers are rather more common now than they were fifty or sixty years ago). How many famous philosophers in the empiricist and analytic traditions have been content to prove that their opponents views are *false*? If you haven't shown them to be nonsense you have not really made the grade!

Two philosophers whose interest in language is (in this sense) disinterested are Devitt and Sterelny. They wish to account for the phenomena of meaning not to expand the bounds of the meaningless in order to entrap their foes. (I do not wish to suggest that Devitt and Sterelny are anything less than tough controversialists. Perish the thought! It is just that they pay their opponents the minimal compliment of understanding them before they proceed to carve them up.) In *Language and Reality* they remark that philosophy of language has 'become too big for its boots' (Devitt and Sterelny, 1999: 4). There is an historical explanation for this. For a long time (three hundred and fifty years in fact) the philosophy of language in the form of theories of meaninglessness has been employed to discredit important philosophical theses - rationalism, materialism, dualism, the existence of God, the non-existence of God, the reality of the external world, the non-reality of the external world, the existence of an objective good and evil, the reality of the past etc, etc, etc. Naturally it has acquired an inflated view of its own importance. Indeed, it suffers from delusions of grandeur. For meaning is a property of *utterances*, of words and sentences and the concepts and beliefs they express. (Indeed, I am inclined to think that 'meaning' is a response-dependent concept since what makes an expression meaningful is the fact that it can be understood.) In the absence of intelligent aliens meaning remains a very human affair. Isn't it *prima facie absurd* to suppose that facts about what does or does not possess this property can determine the nature of non-human reality? Yet it is just this absurdity that is presupposed by philosophers from Hobbes through to Dummett.

But some of you may be getting restive. Anyone moderately acquainted with the history of philosophy can hardly deny the existence of coercive theories of meaning. But

perhaps they are not as pervasive and influential as I suggest? Let us review the historical record.

#### 4. A Catalogue of Shame.

Much has been made, especially by Quentin Skinner (1996), of Hobbes' changing attitudes towards the humanistic rhetoric that he learned as a lad. No doubt Hobbes was immersed in this tradition and no doubt it affected his thought in important ways. But the problem with Skinner's method, which seeks to understand the Hamlets of intellectual history by understanding the debates of the attendant lords, is that it can sometimes blind scholars to what is genuinely new. And as a rhetorician, Hobbes is not so much notable for the techniques he derived from those who came before as the technique he bequeathed to those who came after. For Hobbes was certainly a pioneer, and perhaps the inventor, of a new rhetorical tactic. He was, at any rate, *one* of the first philosophers to systematically use the theory of meaning (and more specifically of meaninglessness) as weapon in ideological controversy. The theory in question is what Bennett (1977) calls *meaning empiricism* which he and Gassendi seem to have invented at about the same time.

Empiricism in its pure form is, of course, an epistemic not semantic doctrine. Empiricists believe that all our knowledge of matters of fact is derived from experience. Knowledge *not* derived from experience - logical or mathematical knowledge for instance - is *trivialized* in various ways. Non-empirical propositions hold in virtue of linguistic conventions or the 'relations of ideas' (a phrase not adequately explained by Hume). Locke devalues a large class of them as 'trifling propositions'.

It is not clear that Hobbes himself was an empiricist in this epistemic sense. (His theory of knowledge defies easy classification.) But he *was* an enthusiast for the psycho-semantic theory that other 17th and 18th Century empiricists used to bolster (and maybe motivate) their theories of knowledge. For according to these empiricists, it is not just our *knowledge* that is supposed to be derived from experience. Our ideas or concepts are derived from experience too. In fact they are copies or combinations of copies of past sensations. 'There is no concept in mans mind which hath not at first, totally or by parts been begotten upon the organs of sense' (Hobbes, 1994: 6/ch.1.2). This is the psychological part of the theory. For both Hobbes and Gassendi this psychological thesis is based upon a materialist physiology. Sensations are caused by (or identified with) the motions of our sense-organs. There is nothing else for ideas to be but motions and they turn out to be the reverberations of some



original sensory stimulus. 'All Fancies are motions within us, relics of those made in the sense' (Hobbes, 1994: 12/ch. 3.2).

Thus far the psychology: now for the semantics. Words are defined in terms of ideas. They are signs of ideas since they indicate the presence of ideas in the speaker and beget similar ideas in the hearer. But this does not entail that words are *about* ideas or that ideas are their referents. Words refer to objects because they signify combinations of ideas and the ideas correspond to properties of the objects (Kretzmann, 1968). The upshot is that words are meaningless unless they can be traced back to past sensations. Words that cannot be defined in this way are 'absurd speeches taken upon credit (without any significance at all)' (Hobbes, 1994:15/ch.3.12). Non-empirical words it seems just don't make sense.

Hobbes tried to do down his opponents by imposing (at least on the learned) a restricted language in which dissident thoughts cannot be expressed. What he has in mind is an impoverished fragment of natural language which contains no words that cannot be defined in terms of experience. He then proclaims that anything that cannot be expressed in this dialect (or family of dialects) simply does not make sense. The theory he proposes is *coercive* since it does not simply set out to *investigate* why we consider some strings of words meaningful and others not, but tries to alter our conception of the meaningful with a view to excluding his ideological foes. Rationalists such as Descartes, together with the scholastics and a vast array of anti-absolutists, whose sentences involve (supposedly) non-empirical concepts, are condemned as mere spouters of gibberish.

Hobbes has an interesting variation on the standard empiricist tactic. He is out to do down the scholastics who (so he believed) still predominated at Oxford and Cambridge. 'I am to speak hereafter of their [the Universities] Office in a Commonwealth and must let you see what things would be amended in them; amongst which the frequency of insignificant speech is one' [*Plus ca change ...* 'some of you may say.'] (Hobbes, 1994: 7/ ch.1.5). But he did not distinguish clearly between nonsensical and contradictory speeches. Quite often he uses his theory of meaning to convict his enemies not of senselessness but of self-contradiction. He *assumes* that material objects can be given empiricist definitions and then supplies his own slanted materialist definitions of key scholastic concepts rendering them absurd. Thus 'Incorporeal substance' becomes 'Incorporeal body' - a manifest oxymoron (Hobbes, 1994: 21/ ch.4.21). It is notable that he is opposed to metaphor - for if metaphors were allowed it would license metaphorical extensions of materialistically defined concepts, and hence weaken his argument.

But why did Hobbes invent the theory in the first place? Or why (if it turns out to be derived in part from previous philosophers) did he decide to dust it off, develop it, and use it as one of his prime polemical weapons? Why isn't it enough to convict his opponents of error? Why accuse them of nonsense as well? Partly, no doubt, because it is more satisfying as a polemical device. If you can show that your opponent is not only wrong, but an out-and-out blatherer, you have really got him on the ropes. But I suspect he had another reason.

In the 17th Century, the first concern of modern-minded philosophers was to refute scholasticism, the fossilized philosophy of Aristotle that had dominated the intellectual scene since the Middle Ages. This was (they thought) a bar to intellectual progress, and, in particular, to the new science, that was being invented by people like Harvey, Galileo and Newton. But there was a problem in dealing with the scholastics. They were champion quibblers. Indeed what a scholastic education taught you to do, was to speak a certain jargon and to argue the toss. The new philosophers did not want to get bogged down in endless petty disputes or to use a jargon which they believed embodied all sorts of errors. What they wanted was a polemical weapon that would cut short these disputes and deal with the scholastics once for all. If it could do away with their wretched jargon, so much the better.

Various devices were tried. One was Cartesian scepticism. In a letter to Mersenne, Descartes boasts that he will 'overturn the foundations on which [the scholastics] are all agreed' (Descartes, 1991:156). But his published works seldom discuss them explicitly. This is because the overturning is mostly done on the sly. As is well known, Descartes' *philosophical* project is to doubt everything that can be doubted, and then to rebuild the edifice of knowledge on a firm foundation of indubitable truth. Now, although a lot of what was commonly believed is incorporated in the new structure, some things are doubted and then left out. These include the opinions of the scholastics. If challenged, Descartes would no doubt say that this was refutation enough. For the scholastic doctrines do not follow from the Cogito etc, and nothing that does not follow from the Cogito deserves the name of knowledge. Furthermore, since everything that *does* follow from the Cogito *does* deserve the name of knowledge, anything that conflicts with this - such as the doctrines of the schoolmen - is obviously false. But the beauty of Descartes' method is that on the whole he can evade such challenges. The schoolmen are refuted without being mentioned. And this is a plus. For Descartes was a native of a country in which the Catholic Church was still strong. And the Church was wedded to scholasticism. To contradict its doctrines could be dangerous - at

least if the contradictions were explicit. In Descartes lifetime, one philosopher was burned at the stake, and Galileo was threatened with torture and forced to recant.

The empiricists, who in the main did not live in Catholic countries, preferred a more forthright method. They invented a theory of meaning which consigned the jargon of the scholastics to senselessness. That way, they did not have to argue with them. (How *can* you argue profitably with a collection of wafflers?) They could then proceed to the more interesting task of inventing the new science and the new philosophy.

I have already suggested, and shall argue at length, that from a liberal point of view this tactic is disreputable. Nevertheless, it might have been historically progressive. Mrs Thatcher may have been wrong to fight the Falklands War even though it led to a happy consequence - the downfall of the Argentinian dictatorship. If the demise of scholasticism and the rise of modern science were Good Things shouldn't the empiricists theory of meaning get some of the credit? This boils down to the question of 'Who Killed Scholasticism?' And it is by no means clear that it was Hobbes and his followers that did the deed. Descartes deserves a large slice of the glory and his tactics though devious were less authoritarian than those of the empiricists. But the real victors were the scientists themselves, Galileo, Boyle and Newton who developed new methods and demonstrated their fruitfulness in the face of scholastic opposition. Galileo in particular did not consign his scholastic opponents to senselessness but confronted them head on. (That's what got him into trouble.) Following Feyerabend some have censured his reliance on rhetoric (Feyerabend, 1978). But at least Galileo allowed the scholastics into the arena of debate before dispatching them with his rhetorical sword.

But if the early empiricists sinned against the canons of liberal debate they were soon visited with fairy punishment. Their shiny new weapon turned out to be more dangerous than they supposed. The new philosophy, in the form of psycho-semantic empiricism, proved to be incompatible with the new science.

Hobbes was a materialist indeed his empiricism is *based* on his materialism. Locke was a scientific realist, that is, he thought the science of his day - the corpuscular or atomic theory of Robert Boyle - was (a) to be taken literally and (b) more or less correct. Matter and bodies generally really *are* composed of Boyle's insensible particles. Of course Locke (unlike Hobbes) was prepared to allow that there are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamed of in materialist ontologies. But this did not mean Boyle was wrong about the

reality and composition of material things. It was just that there might be *other* things - minds, souls or spirits - which were *not* composed of matter.

Now there is a tension between these materialistic opinions and the empiricist psycho-semantic theory. *For if the psycho-semantic theory is correct, materialism or scientific realism will not be conceivable (let alone true) unless material objects are definable in terms of experiences or sensa.* And it is difficult to see how the mind-independent reality of such objects *can* be defined in terms of sensations. If we are using the language of ideas (ideas as copies of sensations) how can a material object be anything *but* a sequence of associated sensations? And this is precisely what a material object *is* for Berkeley, and, arguably for Hume. It is well known that Berkeley retained Locke's empiricism (including his meaning empiricism) but rejected his scientific realism or materialism. Of course Berkeley uses a whole battery of arguments, to disprove the existence of matter. But it is the turning of the empiricist theory of meaning (or better *meaninglessness*) on its creators that is the really decisive move. (Berkeley, 2008). Berkeley is I think right in his *ad hominem* argument. You cannot both accept the psycho-semantic theory of Hobbes and Locke *and* their scientific realism. One of them has to go.

Hume of course went one step beyond. It is not just the concept of material substance that is (rather coyly) consigned to meaninglessness Causality as traditionally conceived, together with the self are likewise dismissed. There is no impression or sensation from which the idea of causality can be derived. Hence we have no idea of causality and the traditional concept is a pseudo-concept. The word 'cause' if it is meant to suggest something like a necessary connexion may be full of philosophical sound and fury, but it signifies nothing.

After Hume a reaction set in. Both Price (1974 [1758]) and Reid (2002[1785]) made telling criticisms of the empiricist psycho-semantics, and Price's writings in particular suggest a general strategy for dealing with restrictive theories of meaning. But the torch was passed on to the Germans. On at least some readings what the *Critique of Pure Reason* is designed to do is demonstrate the *unintelligibility* of certain sorts of metaphysical speculation. Kant, like Hume, can be construed as an aspiring censor.

Frege is often touted as the founder of the analytic tradition. He is extolled by Dummett as the man who substituted the theory of meaning for epistemology as the first philosophy (Dummett: 1991). I do not think he deserves this praise if praise it be. His own interest in the theory of meaning is subordinate to an epistemological or metaphysical

project. He wants to establish arithmetic on firm a priori foundations (Frege, 1997: 92-96, 192-211, Frege, 1980, 1-24). To do this he needs to show that arithmetic is logic and in the creation of a new logic (whose structure is radically different from the surface structure of natural language) questions of meaning naturally arise. Though Frege obviously found them of intrinsic interest, they are something in the nature of a prolegomena to his main purpose. It is true that the theory of meaning has played a large part in 20th century philosophy, but this has usually been in the form of theories of *meaninglessness*. And although Frege was a vigorous controversialist, quite happy to ridicule his opponents and reduce them to incoherence and absurdity, he did not pretend that their views could not be understood. Nor did he use his theory of meaning as a polemical weapon. If treating the theory of meaning as first philosophy amounts to the use of coercive theories of meaning, then this is a tactic he did not usually employ. Moreover it is a tactic that dates back way beyond Frege. (In this sense the linguistic turn begins with Hobbes.) In so far as Frege's professed followers (such as Wittgenstein and Carnap) went in for this sort of thing, they probably got the idea from earlier writers. Carnap was conversant with the empiricist tradition, and even the notoriously unread Wittgenstein was familiar with the work of Fritz Mauthner who celebrated the linguistic theories of Hobbes, Locke and Hume (Haller, 1988: ch. 5). Frege is also praised for extruding 'psychologism' from the theory of meaning. This was indeed his ambition, but I am not sure it represents an intellectual advance. Why is it that inscriptions and patterns of sound are meaningful? Partly, at least, because they can be understood. This suggests that a theory of meaning is in part a theory of understandability (something Dummett at least can hardly disagree with since he appeals to considerations of understandability in arguing for his anti-realist theory of meaning). And it is surely absurd to divorce the theory of understandability from the theory of the understanding mind.

My next claim is a rather more startling one. Pragmatism at least in its Jamesian form, is reliant on a coercive theory of meaning. I shall illustrate this claim with a joke of the late Robert Pargetter's. Pargetter (who lectured at La Trobe when I was doing my PhD) used to give a course on theories of truth. He explained at the beginning that he was going to take a very tolerant and accommodating line. Pragmatism, coherence and correspondence were the options. Each of these theories of truth, he proclaimed, is true in its own way. Pragmatism is useful to believe, coherence is coherent, and the correspondence theory corresponds to the facts. Why is this a good joke? Because it illustrates an important philosophical thesis. *Once you allow that the correspondence theory makes sense* it is obviously the leading contender

(though things become rather more complex if admit deflationary theories of truth). And it is this that is exploited by Russell and Moore in their critiques of pragmatism. They point out that truth cannot be what it is expedient to believe since a) it might be expedient to believe what is false, and b) it might *not* be expedient to believe what is true (Russell, 1994: chs. 4 & 5, Moore, 1922, ch. 3). The obvious answer - attempted in a half-hearted sort of way by James and pushed along with rather more vigour by Rorty - is to deny that it makes sense to suppose that a statement could be true or false independently of our knowledge or experience. ('There is no meaning left in this idea of trueness or as-ness if no reference to the possibility of concrete working on the part of the idea is made.' 'Good consequences ... assign the only intelligible practical *meaning* to that difference in our beliefs which our habit of calling them true or false comports'. James, 1978:312-313.) The idea of a paying falsehood or a non-paying truth is simply nonsense. And this of course requires a coercive theory of meaning. But in fact pragmatists cannot stop there. They must extend the bounds of nonsense even further or give up the Tarskian biconditional (to which nearly everyone pays lip-service) that 'P' is true if and only if P. *Something* like this looks like a necessary truth conveying a large part or what you need to know if you want to understand what truth is all about. But if some such biconditional is necessary, the pragmatist theory of truth must be false. For it might be expedient to believe that *A* exists, (Russell's stock example) even though *A* does not exist. In which case it would not be true that *A* exists even though it is expedient to believe it. The pragmatist is faced with three choices: give up the biconditional, give up the pragmatist definition of truth or deny that *A* can *not* exist when it is expedient to believe that it *does*. And the best way to suppress this possibility is to deny that it makes sense. Pragmatists who retain the biconditional must therefore claim that it is nonsense to suppose that things could be thus and so when it is expedient to believe otherwise. So far as they are concerned metaphysical realism *makes no sense*.

Russell is on the whole one of the heroes of my story. Though he invented theories of meaning that could have been used coercively he did not often use them that way himself. But there is one big blot on his philosophical escutcheon. As Arthur Prior put it, he 'sold the pass' so that now 'Bosanquetterie sprawls across the face of philosophy like a monstrous tumour' (Prior 1976: 26). The pass-selling was done with the theory of types. (Russell:1908) For this gave philosophers a respectable, non-self-serving reason to suppose that what *seemed* to make sense was in fact nonsensical. If anyone were to insist that *they* understood some bit of metaphysics and that therefore it must be meaningful whatever Wittgenstein and

the positivists might say, post-Russellian philosophers had a ready reply. 'It *seems* to make sense we agree. But Russell has shown that many apparently meaningful statements in Mathematics and elsewhere are in fact ill-formed - or rather cannot be translated into a properly formulated language. Intuitions of meaningfulness therefore can be mistaken and in your case this possibility is realized'. But this reply begins to lose its force once we realize that there are other methods of resolving the paradoxes, including the method of *not* resolving them and adopting a paraconsistent logic (Priest, 2006).

Of course, when it comes to coercive theories of meaning (or at least coercive criteria) the worst offender is Wittgenstein. It is not just that for him the theory of meaning (in this sense) constitutes First Philosophy. In some of his formulations the deployment of a coercive theory of meaning constitutes the *whole* of philosophy. 'The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said - i.e. propositions of natural science ... and then whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions.' (Wittgenstein, 1961:73-74/ Prop. 6.53.) The Newspeak here is that fragment of natural language (apparently including the propositions of natural science) consisting of propositions which are truth-functions of elementary propositions (whatever these turn out to be). Wittgenstein wants to put a stop not only to metaphysics but to 'rumbling and roaring', to intellectual chit-chat about questions of value and aesthetics (Wittgenstein, 1961:1). In Wittgenstein's opinion most of this is worthless drivel. And even when it isn't worthless - and remember the young Wittgenstein considers his *own* writings to be drivel, though true and definitive drivel - it is an attempt to say the unsayable. And what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence. Well, not quite. *Wittgenstein* is (so to speak) licensed to engage in a little crimethink, to eff the ineffable with a view to demonstrating just how heinous it is in other people. (Though what is to stop other metaphysicians from pretending their nonsense constitutes the ladder to some deep but unsayable truth he does not say.) It is interesting that in daily life and conversation, Wittgenstein tried to impose his intellectual prohibitions on other people whilst disregarding them himself. M.O'C. Drury, one of Wittgenstein's subservient young men, records the comment of W.E. Johnson (Drury 'Conversations with Wittgenstein' in Rhees: 103): 'I consider it a disaster for Cambridge that Wittgenstein has returned. A man incapable of carrying on a discussion. If I say a sentence has meaning for me no one has the right to say it

is senseless'. ('What a funny old buffer Johnson was' Drury seems to be saying.) And Julian Bell complains in heroic couplets that:

He talks nonsense, numerous statements makes  
 Forever his own vow of silence breaks  
 Ethics aesthetics talks of day and night  
 And calls things good and bad and wrong and right

Wittgenstein's biographer reprints these verses as an amusing *jeu d'esprit*. (Monk, 1990: 257.) The idea that they might constitute a serious - even a damning - criticism of Wittgenstein's character, conduct and opinions does not seem to occur to him<sup>11</sup>.

In the later philosophy Wittgenstein retains a coercive approach meaning though his overall philosophy has become more complex. Philosophical perplexity arises from the misuse of language. So there is a privileged set of unphilosophical uses which are in order as they stand<sup>12</sup>. These constitute the Newspeak. Wittgenstein is something of a populist about this privileged family of uses. What the bed-makers say makes sense; it's the gentlemen for whom the beds are made who allow their intelligences to be bewitched by language. (Klagge and Nordmann eds, 2003: 353.) But the real difference between the late and the early philosophy is that Wittgenstein's coercive tactics have become *less* not *more* intellectually respectable. In the *Tractatus* at least he had a theory of what made propositions meaningful. It was a silly theory, but a theory nonetheless. In the *Philosophical Investigations* he has nothing but a mixed bag of metaphors and a vague gesture towards use, plus a rough line round the privileged uses. Yet he still presumes to say that 'the results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or other pieces of plain nonsense' (Wittgenstein, 1967: 48/ 1.119). But without a developed account of what makes language meaningful (and an account backed by argument) how does he *know* that what he uncovers *is* nonsense? And why should anyone believe him when he claims that it is? When he discusses the philosophical use of a word and asks whether it is ever 'used this way in the language-game that is its original home' (Wittgenstein, 1967: 48/ 1.113), the suggestion is that the word makes sense so long as it

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<sup>11</sup> The full text of the poem can be found in McGuinness ed. 2008: 173-180. McGuinness does not take it very seriously either.

<sup>12</sup> It is certain *uses* of words rather than certain words which don't make sense. Though Wittgenstein was rather hostile to the peculiar vocabulary of philosophy, quite ordinary words could get you into trouble if you misused them in a philosophical way. Thus Russell did not quite hit the mark when he insisted as against Wittgenstein and his followers that philosophy like other subjects is entitled to its technical terms. See Russell, 1959: 214-254.



sticks to its original abode but ceases to do so once it goes a-wandering. But why shouldn't a word move to a new address without degenerating into insignificance? No reason is given whatsoever. Yet without such a reason Wittgenstein's technique - or at least the technique he professes - is completely unwarranted.

As for the positivists, I have dealt with them already in the person of Otto Neurath. Their aims were more overtly political than Wittgenstein's. They conceived of themselves as champions of science, liberty and (in some cases) socialism against the metaphysical partisans of persecution, reaction and religion. Verificationism was a weapon in the ideological conflict. A coercive theory of meaning was attractive to them for much the same reason as it appealed to Hobbes and Gassendi. They did not want to deal with their opponents piecemeal, but wanted to dispatch them at one fell blow. And indeed it is easy to sympathize with this desire. Who wants to wade through *Sein und Zeit* or refute Heidegger point by point? It would be like conducting a battle in a pot of glue! (Although Neurath, to do him justice, did descend into the pit of nonsense from time to time. He wrote a long and detailed critique of Spengler's *Decline of the West*. [Neurath, 1973: ch. 6].) The theory of meaning provides a short-cut to ideological victory.

I could go on into the present but I think I have made my point. Coercive theories of meaning are common, indeed pervasive in the analytic and empiricist traditions. They are used up to this very day and will continue to be whilst the name of Wittgenstein is held in high regard and verificationism and pragmatism are going concerns. The question is: are they any good?

So far I have described a philosophical tactic common in the empiricist and analytic traditions. I have expressed my dislike, given a potted history and smeared it with guilt by association. But I have not given an argument that it is morally wrong. Nor have I shown that it is intellectually unjustified. To do *that* I need to show that the theories of meaning which are used to back up the tactic are all of them false. *Some* of them are false, no doubt, since they contradict each other and cannot all be true. This suggests that at some time in the history of philosophy meaningful propositions have been consigned to the meaningless basket. But the possibility remains that a coercive theory of meaning could be based on truth. Some aspiring philosophic censor may be doing away with what is *really* meaningless. To discredit the tactic I need to show either that this cannot be or, at least, that it is highly unlikely. I need to argue that coercive theories of meaning are inherently suspect.. And at first sight this looks like a tall order.

I turn to this topic in §6. But in the next section I argue that whether the theories are true or not, the tactic is disreputable. It degrades one's opponents below the status of rational beings and undermines the chief liberal arguments for tolerance and liberty.

### 5. The Moral Argument<sup>13</sup>

In his notoriously soppy introduction to *Philosophical Explanations*, (an introduction that is nevertheless outdone in soppieness by the Preface<sup>14</sup>) Robert Nozick asks whether forcing people to believe things by argument is a 'nice way to behave to someone' (Nozick, 1981:5). The evident implication is that it is not. I disagree. For if I argue with you this suggests that I take you seriously as a rational being, someone who is willing to be swayed by argument. This is obvious when we recall who we are *not* prepared to argue with. We don't argue with the stupid or the invincibly pig-headed.

Of course we sometimes dodge an argument when we have a better opinion of our potential partner. We may agree to differ because we are too tired or have not got the time for a debate. Or we may have fought the issue to a standstill. When every argument has been canvassed, we are driven back on our individual 'pricing policies' our systems for weighing pros and cons. At this point we can call an honourable truce. But generally if we approach an issue with tact, if we skirt certain subjects or if we agree to differ, this is because we believe the other party is not wholly rational. For example, I had a colleague, the late Pavel Tichy, whose intellect I highly admired. I debated with him about history, art, metaphysics and modality and even - taking my life in my hands - paraconsistent logic. But I did not discuss politics. And the reason is that I felt there was just no getting through to him on this topic. He obviously held the same opinion about me which is why politics is a topic we tended to avoid. But what this shows is that each of us regarded the other as less than fully rational - I almost said less than fully *human*. If I had respected him more I would have no such inhibitions (and vice versa). Politics, like everything else would have been on the agenda.

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<sup>13</sup> Since I have some slight reputation as an error theorist some readers may be wondering what business I have with a moral argument. In so far as my claims aspire to truth, they can be read in an if-thenist sense: *if* we assume certain broadly liberal values, *then* certain philosophical practices are morally suspect.

<sup>14</sup> For a brilliant critique see 'Always Apologize, Always Explain: Robert Nozick's War Wounds' in Stove, 1991; ch. 3.

It is sometimes said that we defer to the elderly as a sign of respect. Maybe so. But if we do, it is a sign of respect for what they were not for what they have become. We are happy to let Uncle Arthur's ramblings go uncontradicted, not because we think he is wise, but because we think he is senile and know that argument would be pointless.

Now the use of a coercive theory of meaning manifests just this kind of disrespect for one's opponents. There is no point in arguing with them since they fall short as rational beings. They are not just bigoted like Uncle Arthur. They don't even make sense. Argument therefore is an impossibility. Their burlblings can be safely dismissed. If they are to be tolerated this would be an act of kindness rather than respect. It would certainly not be because we would expect to learn anything from them in the process of debate.

I shall illustrate this claim by means of a fiction. I shall suppose that some philosophic sect with a coercive theory of meaning is in the majority. I shall call them the Empirics. I will then run through John Stuart Mill's famous argument for free speech from *On Liberty*, ch. 2. As will become apparent, it does not apply to the metaphysical minority who are presumed to talk nonsense.

Mill's argument is based on three separate scenarios: **Case 1**, The majority thinks it is in the right even though it may not be; **Case 2**, the majority *is* in the right and its opponents are mistaken; and **Case 3**, the majority opinion contains a substantial dollop of truth but also an admixture of error. There is some truth (though less of it) in the opinions of the minority. (Mill, 1989: 20-36, 37-47 and 47-53.)

**Case 1.** Suppose the majority believes itself to be in the right. Still they can't be sure that this is so, human fallibility being what it is. So they should not suppress rival opinions which might turn out to be correct. (There are various complications to this argument but they need not concern us here.)

Given that the Empirics are in the majority does this fallibilist argument dictate a policy of toleration? Not for their nonsensical foes. For senseless opinions can't be true. And it was because the minority opinion *might* be true that Mill suggested toleration. Thus the liberal argument for free speech breaks down. There might be a humanitarian motive for letting them blather on but there is no way that they can be vindicated in the course of cultural debate. The possibility that they are right can't be the reason for toleration.

But suppose the majority is a bit more sophisticated. Suppose they take a fallibilist attitude to *everything* including their own semantic theories. (A wise move given the poor record of coercive theories of meaning.) One of the things they think they might be wrong

about is the senselessness of their opponents' views. Some contemporary philosophers are like this. Dummett for instance argues in a diffident and tentative spirit that *probably* realism about this or that is unintelligible. Though he thinks his own arguments are 'very powerful' he seldom if ever boasts of a decisive polemical victory. Realism remains an option. Which means that it is possible that what the realists say *might make sense*. Suppose then that the Empirics adopt a policy of toleration and argue with their opponents on the basis that what they say *might* be meaningful. Then they risk the kind of pragmatic self-contradiction that menaces Michael Dummett.

Dummett is a latter-day verificationist. He has general arguments for anti-realism with respect to the unobservable, but he got going with mathematical objects, such as sets, numbers, and the propositions which deal in them. He is an anti-realist about these in that Mathematical propositions are not supposed to be true or false unless there is an effective method for proving them one way or the other. What makes a mathematical proposition true, (when it is true) is the method of its proof. What makes it false is a proof to the contrary. Thus some Mathematical propositions are neither true nor false since they cannot be proved either way. Verification-transcendent statements (as opposed to those that have not been verified or falsified so far) are in his view *unintelligible* the latter-day verificationist's polite synonym for *meaningless*.

But if realism really is meaningless then much of Dummett's writing is meaningless too. For he often entertains realist hypotheses and discusses realist positions. In practice, he displays an excellent grasp of the truth-conditions he professes not to understand, namely when he polemicizes against them. He is able, for instance, to draw consequences and determine the appropriate logic - not something one can do with mere gibberish. Strong evidence this, of understanding. But *ab esse, ad posse* - what *is* understood *can be* understood. Which suggests that realism is intelligible and therefore meaningful. Thus Dummett's polemical practice belies his theory of meaning. Since he seems to understand the ravings of the realist, what can Dummett *mean* when he says that verification-transcendent truth is *unintelligible*?

We can put the point another way. Let us grant that Dummett is right and that verification-transcendent statements really are meaningless in his preferred sense. But there must be a second-class sort of meaning possessed by 'There is intelligent life in other galaxies' that is *not* possessed by 'Ying-tong-diddle-I-Po'. It is this second-class sort of meaning that allows us to draw consequences from verification-transcendent statements,

figure out the appropriate logic and so on. Then maybe it is this second-class sort of meaning that is really important. For it is this second-class sort of meaning that sustains human communication and philosophical debate. Who knows? Maybe statements possessed of this second-class meaning can even be *true*. In which case first-class meaning drops out as irrelevant!

Now if our imaginary Empirics are thorough-going fallibilists it looks as if they will be faced with the same problem. If they act on their fallibilism and condescend to argue with the metaphysical minority - which means, among other things, being ready to entertain metaphysical hypotheses - they will be treating the suspect discourse as meaningful. Which suggests that fallibilism is not really an option for coercive theories of meaning. For to admit to fallibility is in effect to admit to failure.

Much better then, to adopt a dogmatic attitude towards the theory of meaning. The metaphysical minority do not make sense and if they are to be tolerated this is only out of the goodness of the majority's hearts.

**Case 2.** The majority are in the right. This means, among other things, that their coercive theory of meaning is correct. But, says Mill even though the minority are mistaken their voice should still be heard. For if the majority opinion goes undisputed it will degenerate into 'dead dogma' (Mill, 1989: 37).

Mill's 'dead dogma' thesis seems to me to express an important truth. Marxism-Leninism is a case in point. It withered in the minds of true believers because it could not be debated. But if the Empirics doctrine is to be subjected to wholesome contradiction it cannot be from the metaphysical minority. For if the majority opinion is correct, then the disputatious remarks of their adversaries simply don't make sense. How can you acquire a lively sense of the truth of your opinions by disputing with mere wafflers? Indeed how can you carry on such a dispute? The majority would be condemned to the tactics of Wittgenstein's methodologically correct philosopher. 'Whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, they would demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions.' (Wittgenstein, 1961:73-74/ Prop. 6.53.) This tedious process would only constitute a defence of *one part* of their doctrines, namely the theory of meaning. As for the rest, debate would be profitless if not impossible.

Of course the majority could simulate debate by *pretending* that what their opponents said was meaningful. They could, so to speak, suspend their incomprehension, and take the waffle seriously. But in that case the threat of pragmatic self-contradiction rears its ugly

head. The pretend-meaning that the majority concede to their opponents' arguments looks like what a theory of meaning ought to be about.

So again, Mill's argument for toleration collapses. If wholesome and vivifying debate is possible the empiric theory of meaning is called into question. But if it really is true (as Case 2 assumes), then genuine debate is an impossibility. There is thus no intellectual (as opposed to humanitarian) rationale for toleration.

**Case 3.** On Case 3, both the rival doctrines contain an admixture of truth and falsehood. Tolerance is required so that each side can learn from the other. In the course of debate falsehoods are edited out and the truths of the other side adopted leading to an all-round intellectual improvement. But as we have seen, the empiric majority cannot enter into such a debate without the risk of pragmatic self-contradiction. Case 3 isn't really compatible with a coercive theory of meaning. To suppose that there might be some truth in the opinions of the minority is to suppose that the coercive theory of meaning of the majority is *false*. Even if the Case 3 scenario were true, this is not a hypothesis the majority could consistently believe and act upon. A coercive theory of meaning is not really compatible with this sort of mutually improving debate. Of course the majority could be fallibilists about their theory of meaning and engage in debate on that basis. But again the polemical practice and the theory of meaning would come into conflict.

The upshot is that the empiric majority cannot expect to derive any benefit from argument with their foes if their theory of meaning is true. If they act on the assumption that it *might* be false and enter into a dialogue on that basis, they will soon find that their argumentative practice conflicts with their theoretical commitments. When it comes to the theory of meaning, they cannot afford to be fallibilists. Since Mill's argument for toleration relies on the premise of fallibilism, it is not an argument that applies to them - at least when they are dealing with 'meaningless' doctrines and the minorities that believe them. Tolerance for them will be a grace and favour affair, not the basis for intellectual progress.

Underlying Mill's argument for toleration is an attitude of respect for fellow-citizens as potential partners in a dialogue. This attitude is inappropriate if they are, so to speak, beyond the linguistic pale. But the whole purpose of a coercive theory of meaning is to place your opponents in this invidious position. To use this technique in philosophy therefore is to manifest a disrespect for other people, to treat them as less than fully human. The Greek name for non-Greeks was barbarian. The name encapsulates a not-so-subtle attempt to dehumanize the Other since the idea is that barbarians don't really talk but just go ba-ba-ba.

In the same way coercive theories of meaning are attempts to barbarize the opposition, to reduce their reasonings to prattle. (Metaphysicians are, in effect, the 'Gooks' of analytic and empiricist philosophy.) This is a profoundly illiberal attitude.

## **6. The Intellectual Critique.**

But a moral critique can only go so far. It may be that to use a coercive theory of meaning manifests a disrespect for one's fellow philosophers. But this does not show that coercive theories of meaning are false. The possibility remains that a coercive theory, though morally tainted, could nevertheless be true. In which case its creator would be justified in deploying it. Perhaps he would be sinning against liberalism by not treating his opponents as potential partners in a rational debate. But if their theories really did not make sense, he would surely be right to do so. If one's opponents really are prattling it is surely absurd to treat them as if they make sense. If they are (linguistically speaking) barbarians it is ridiculous to pretend that they are saying something other than ba-ba-ba. A 'liberal' attitude would be inappropriate in this context. Indeed my rather puritanical discourse ethic could be turned against me. Wouldn't it be subtly patronizing and thus a sign of disrespect to take people seriously as speakers when in fact they did not make sense? It would be an act of bad faith to pretend to understand what could not be understood, and to pass over such a dreadful failure to measure up as a rational being. No - what a respect-for-persons ethic demands for people who misuse their faculty for rational discourse is a stern reproof followed by instruction in the art of making sense. (Maybe Wittgenstein was not such a bad fellow after all!) So what I would like to do is provide an argument against all coercive theories of meaning. If there is a general presumption that they are false, and if the ones on offer have been refuted, then the moral argument may dissuade people from inventing more of them. But by itself, the moral argument has no bite. We need an intellectual critique as well. But this is easier said than done. It is not very taxing to pick holes in individual theories of meaning, but how am I to do away with coercive theories of meaning as a class?

Four lines of argument suggest themselves.

### **6.1. Pragmatic Self-Contradiction**

As I have argued already, coercive theorists run a risk of pragmatic self-contradiction. If they deign to argue with their opponents they must perforce take their assertions seriously.

They must draw out their consequences, insert them into conditionals etc etc. After a while the claim that these sentences are meaningless begins to look a bit thin. But coercive meaning theorists are not necessarily condemned to this conflict between theory and practice. If they don't argue with the unintelligible heathen, the problem does not arise. It is the fallibilists among them, the ones who sin the least against liberalism, that are hoist with this particular petard. Really this is not an argument against coercive theories of meaning but only an argument against certain theorists. It is not Dummett's intolerant *theories* that get him into trouble here, but rather his tolerant *practices*.

## 6.2. Piecemeal Criticisms

If anyone were writing a history of comic inadvertence in philosophy, coercive theories of meaning would take up several chapters. Seldom have so many philosophers sat on branches they were sawing off. To put it another way, coercive theories have a nasty tendency to get out of control and turn against their inventors. Two problems are common. A. The theory turns out to have the wrong extension. Either the target discourse (i.e. class of utterances the theorist wants to reduce to incoherence) winds up making sense or the theorist's own preferred brand of chat gets condemned as nonsense.

We have seen one example of this sort of thing already with Hobbes' psycho-semantics. This was partly designed to foster the new science by removing some of its foes from the arena of debate. But one of the leading concepts of the new science, matter, could not be defined in terms of the ghosts of departed *sensa*. This was Berkeley's great thesis. Hume went one better, pointing out that there is no idea corresponding to the word 'cause'. These are not results that Hobbes would have welcomed had he lived to see them.

The positivist theory of meaning (or rather their successive theories of meaning) had equally embarrassing consequences. Since its hey-day in the thirties and forties, verificationism has fallen into disrepute among philosophers, although (as Ayer remarks in his autobiography) many continue to live off its immoral earnings<sup>15</sup>. It was originally devised by the logical positivists as a weapon against their ideological enemies. The aim was to despatch religious propagandists plus old-fashioned metaphysicians at one fell blow, by dismissing their talk as inherently meaningless. Unfortunately the weapon proved to be double-edged. For though the general idea of the verification principle *seems* clear enough, endless difficulties arose in the attempt to clarify it. Successive formulations either included

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<sup>15</sup> Ayer, 1977: 156. What he actually says is, 'They have lived on the money but are ashamed to acknowledge its source'



what its proponents meant to exclude - metaphysical or religious propositions - or excluded what they meant to include - scientific laws and findings. (See Hempel, 1950, Soames, 2003: ch. 13.) It was these not inconsiderable difficulties of detail (plus Quine's thesis that our statements about the external world face the tribunal of experience not individually but only as a corporate body [Quine, 1980: 41]) that led to its demise. Dummett in his attempt to revive verificationism has avoided these problems by prudently refraining from an exact formulation.

B. The other problem common among coercive theories of meaning is that they have a yen for self-destruction. They often exclude themselves as senseless. The young Wittgenstein recognized this problem in the *Tractatus* but with magnificent *chutzpah* determined to brazen it out. He announces that his theory is meaningless at the end of the book. Surprisingly this did not diminish his prestige. It was some time before vulgarians such as Karl Popper and Scott Soames pointed out that there is surely something wrong with a book that is nonsensical if true and therefore not true. (Popper, 1966, vol. 2: 297-8; Soames, 2003: 252-253)<sup>16</sup> The logical positivists were not so fortunate. As is well known their theory of meaning seems to be self-stultifying however formulated. For it divides significant truths into two classes, the analytic and the empirically verifiable, into neither of which it falls. It thus rules itself out from the realm of sense. Again, if it is true it is meaningless and therefore not true. In endeavouring to exclude the metaphysicians the positivists issued a self-denying ordinance. They at least had the grace to blush. (However I shall be arguing later that this criticism won't quite do as it stands. Theories of meaning are - or perhaps *ought to be* - empirical. If so, verificationist theories of meaning are not nonsensical by their own standards. They are, however, false. Thus the alternatives for verificationism are either suicide or empirical refutation,)

Although this criticism is old hat it is perhaps worth remarking that *modern* forms of verificationism may be vulnerable to a reflexive critique. Dummett is not an empiricist and his tone is less combative than the positivists. Yet he does implicitly appeal to a verificationist criterion of significance. The whole point of the exercise is to show that realism about this or that is *unintelligible*.

His criterion of significance would go something like this. A proposition is significant iff a) it represents something we can be shown so that we can manifest our understanding directly through assent or dissent, or b) the holding of some set of a)-type

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<sup>16</sup> There are, of course, many attempts to solve this problem in the literature. None that I have read strikes me as remotely plausible.

conditions establishes its truth (by something like linguistic convention) whilst a different set establishes its falsity. Plainly this biconditional does not fall into category a). But neither does it fall into category b). That is, it is not as if we are *taught* (except in schools of Dummettology) 'to accept the occurrence of certain conditions [Dummett's arguments?] which we have been trained to recognise as conclusively justifying' its assertion (Dummett, 1978: 362) Dummettism is not built into the language. Since the criterion falls into neither category it is, on its own showing unintelligible.

This is not intended as knockdown argument. And it would have to be updated to deal with more recent developments in Dummett's doctrines. However, it does suggest that he is not immune to the problems that beset his positivist predecessors.

But although coercive theories of meaning have a habit of getting out of hand and often develop suicidal tendencies, it is not clear that every such theory must be cursed with these defects. The possibility remains of a coercive theory which excludes what it is meant to exclude and survives its own strictures.

### 6.3. The Watts Response

The Watts response is named for one of my minor heroes, one William Watts, a member of Kissinger's National Security team at the Whitehouse. On the invasion of Cambodia he resigned. 'Watts then had a show-down talk with General Alexander Haig. "You've just had an order from your Commander-in-Chief", Haig said, "You can't resign". "Fuck you AI", Watts replied, "I just did" (Heller, 1997: 359, Shawcross, 1986: 145).

The pioneer of the Watts response in philosophy was Richard Price in *A Review of the Principles of Morals*, 1774 [1758]. The coercive meaning theorist, in this case David Hume, tells Richard that he can't *meaningfully* say, think or conceive X. 'Fuck you Davey', says Richard, 'I just did.' Only being an 18th Century clergyman rather than a member of the Nixon administration, he was rather more polite about it.

Price's problem is this. He is opposed to the command-based moral systems of Hobbes and Locke and the theory of Hutcheson and Hume which construes moral properties as secondary qualities. But he realises that the empiricist psycho-semantics necessitates something of the kind. Remember that the psycho-semantics of early empiricism requires that all concepts, including moral concepts, must be defined in empirical terms or rejected as senseless. So far (up to 1758) two theories had been proposed that met this constraint, the Hobbes/Locke theory where right and wrong are reduced to the dictates of authority whether

Divine or human, and the Hutcheson/Hume theory which analyses them in terms of idealized dispositions to approve and disapprove. Price realises that it is not enough to criticize these theories. If he is to make room for his own non-naturalist analysis he must demolish the psycho-semantic theory which demands some such account of morals.

He does this by *turning a number of Hume's arguments against him*. Hume's general strategy in Book I of the *Treatise* is to argue like this.

1. If the empiricist psycho-semantics is correct, then we have no idea/concept of X.
2. The empiricist psycho-semantics is correct.
3. Therefore we have no idea/concept of X.

The most important of these Xs is the concept of *causality* or *necessary connexion* as something other than constant conjunction and the feeling of expectation that it arouses. But the ideas of *infinite divisibility*, of a *vacuum*, of *solidity*, of *substance*, of *power*, and of the *self* (!) are likewise dispatched. Really we *have* no such ideas since there are no impressions from which they could be copied nor can we form any image corresponding to the words.

Price turns the tables by accepting Hume's conditional premise indeed, suggesting that it applies to a number of other X's besides the ones mentioned by Hume (*vis inertia* for instance.) His detailed arguments are often borrowed from Hume as he himself acknowledges. He then argues that in fact we *do* have these concepts and that, what's more, they have a vital role to play not only in Newtonian science but in our common sense view of the world. Hence empiricism - or psycho-semantic empiricism - is false (Price, 1974: 17-40). His argument can be presented thus.

1. If the empiricist psycho-semantics is correct, then we have no idea/concept of X.
2. We do have an idea/concept of X.
3. Therefore the empiricist psycho-semantics is not correct.

Price backs this up with the claim that Hume's second premise is 'destitute of all proof' (Price, 1974; 43). And he puts his finger on the subtle mistake on which the empiricist psycho-semantics is based - the confusion of thinking with imagining, and conceiving of X

with having an image of it. (Though it has to be said that this devastating riposte goes back to Descartes, 1985: 126-127)

In fact Price could have gone one better. For Hume's main *argument* for his psycho-semantics, and particularly for the claim (as Price puts it) 'that all our ideas are impressions or copies of impressions' is little more than a challenge: Show me a concept (idea) that is *not* copied from an impression! (Hume, 1978: 4, Hume, 1975: 19.) If *this* is his argument for premise 2, Hume can hardly use that premise to discredit potential counterexamples!

Price can then deploy his non-naturalist account of morals secure in the knowledge that Hume can raise no objection against him that would not also be an objection to the concepts of Newtonian science and Common sense. Of course, the fact that Price has fended off the psycho-semantic challenge does not mean that he is immune to ontological objections. Price argues that right and wrong, good and evil, are intelligible concepts and do not have to be defined in terms of anything else. I think this argument is a success. But the fact that the words 'right' and 'wrong' are *conceptually* in order does not prove that there are properties corresponding to those words, any more than the fact that 'phlogiston' makes sense proves that there really is such a substance as phlogiston. Having proved his conceptual point Price needs to make good his metaphysical claim - that there really are such properties as right and wrong. Indeed his own examples illustrate this point. Price believed in a property of solidity which meant (very roughly) being filled up with stuff. What Rutherford's experiments with the gold leaf show is that with the possible exception of neutron stars, nothing is solid in this sense. We can conceive of solidity all right, it is just that nothing (or nothing Price had ever dreamed of) corresponds to the concept. But conceptual analysis is one thing, ontology another. And conceptually speaking, Price's ethic is completely kosher.

At bottom Price's argument is an exercise in Johnsonian stone-kicking. Hume says that certain words can't be understood. Price insists that he does understand them so Hume must be wrong. What gives his argument an extra fillip is that many of the words in question are essential to Newtonian science. Since Newton's epistemic prestige considerably exceeds that of Hume, it is Price who is more likely to be believed. It is much more likely that Hume is mistaken than that Newton's theory is nonsense.

But the Watts response retains considerable force even without such august backing. The coercive meaning theorist claims that certain words or sentences are meaningless and cannot be understood. The Watts respondent replies that she understands them perfectly well, and that therefore the theory is false. Why should the linguistic intuitions of the

respondent yield to the pretensions of the theorist? Don't they constitute evidence that the theory is mistaken? Where does the theory get the authority to overcome these appearances? After all the bases of many coercive theories are epistemically spongy to say the least. Hobbes psycho-semantics is founded on a dubious physiology and by the time it gets to Hume it is founded on nothing at all. There is no real argument for Wittgenstein's theory in the *Tractatus*, and what there is, on his own showing, senseless. And the theory of the *Philosophical Investigations* is, so far as I can see, completely devoid of support. As for the positivists they skipped nimbly from basis to basis as each one crumbled beneath them. So long as they could prove that metaphysics was nonsense, they didn't seem to care. Dummett's theory has a bit more going for it than most, but even so it hardly commands assent. It is not at all clear that it deserves to win out against our intuitions that verification-transcendent propositions make sense.

On the whole, then, our linguistic intuitions are a lot more deserving of respect than the theories that seek to discredit them. But to finish off the coercive tradition, I need to go one better. I need to show that the intuitions *always* win out against the theory. Although I can't quite show this, I think I *can* show that there is a strong prima facie argument for preferring the one to the other. So strong is the presumption that I venture to hope it will subvert all these vulgar systems of philosophy.

#### **6.4. What are Theories of Meaning For?**

Rid yourself for a moment of philosophical *parti pris*, forget all those dense tomes that you may have read (or even written) on the subject, and ask yourself what a general theory of meaning is *for*. What problem or what range of problems is it supposed to solve? The great puzzle seems to be this. Somehow we use symbols - sound patterns in the air, visual patterns on paper - to convey ideas and information. (Both these words are vague gestures but they will do for the moment.) How do we manage to do this? (We don't do it in the manner of animals where a fixed signal triggers a fairly specific range of responses. We can understand utterances that we have never heard before and which haven't been programmed into us.) What properties must an utterance or inscription have for this to be possible - i.e. what must it be like to be meaningful? This is or ought to be what a theory of meaning is all about. If this is correct, it suggests that for any given language, the facts which a theory of meaning is supposed to explain are our intuitions about what does and does not make sense. Some

strings of symbols are meaningful and others not, whilst others still are borderline. The task of a theory of meaning is to explain these data; to tell us what it is about the meaningful strings that makes them meaningful and what it is about the meaningless strings that makes them meaningless. It should also explain why we are undecided about the borderline cases. An explanation is a theory from which the things to be explained can be derived, perhaps with the aid of auxiliary hypotheses. It must 'save the phenomena', that is it must entail the factual data that it sets out to explain. Otherwise it is a failure.

Now a coercive theory of meaning cannot fulfill its coercive function *unless* it fails this test. The whole point of a coercive theory of meaning is to *contract* the realm of the meaningful; to show that many of the things we considered meaningful are meaningless. (Specifically the statements of our coercive theorist's opponents.) But this means that the theory does *not* save the phenomena. It does not explain the data that a theory of meaning ought to explain, i.e. our collective intuitions about what makes sense. Which is *prima facie* evidence that it is false.

We can now see why the intuitions of the Watts respondent should prevail against the coercive theory. Generally speaking the *explanandum* has epistemic priority over the *explanans*. We don't discard the facts because they fail to fit the theory. We discard the theory because it fails to fit the facts. And in this case our linguistic intuitions constitute the facts.

Note, I do not claim that my argument here is conclusive. If, in the course of our enquiries we develop a really fruitful conception of meaning - one that helps to solve pressing problems in psychology or the social sciences for instance - then we might have to give up the folk-category of the meaningful and go with the new theory-generated taxonomy. But such a revisionist theory would have to be very good - much better, I should say, than anything that Dummett, Hume, Wittgenstein or anyone else has managed to come up with. At all events, the burden of proof rests with the revisionist; the aspiring philosophic censor. We don't need arguments to show that what *seems* to be meaningful *is* meaningful. We need arguments to show that it is *not*. And these must be something better than question-begging appeals to a theory of meaning which flies in the face of the linguistic facts<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> See Pigden, 2007, where this argument is used to criticize both the verificationism of Ayer and the 'Fundamental Principle' of Russell's semantics.

## 7. Conclusion

When we run over libraries persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? (Hume, 1975: 165.) If we take in our hand any volume of empiricist or analytic philosophy, for instance; lets us ask *Does it employ a theory of meaninglessness to do down a large class of philosophical opponents whose very existence demonstrates that the theory fails to fit the facts? Does it rely on a criterion or symptomatology of meaning that rests on little more than the arrogant say-so of the philosopher in question?* If the answer is *yes*, we won't commit it to the flames - *that* is a practice we leave to our illiberal opponents - but we should consign that part of the work that employs such techniques to the museum of philosophical falsehood. For, in so far as it relies on a coercive theory of meaning it contains nothing but sophistry and illusion. We can learn from it, of course, since even if the a philosopher's method is wrong, he may have interesting things to say, if only in passing. But we will be picking up the pieces of philosophies that are broken, not learning from philosophers who are basically right. One of the main tactics - if not *the* main tactic - of the empiricist and analytic traditions has got to be given up. And many of the products of those traditions must likewise be offered up in the name of liberty - some of Hobbes, a fair bit of Locke, half of Berkeley, large chunks of Hume, Russell's Theory of Types, verificationism in its positivist and Dummettian variants, much of pragmatism and most of Wittgenstein - *all* these have to be sacrificed if we are to save our souls as philosophic liberals. If my argument is correct all this work is not just fundamentally flawed but morally tainted - tainted, that is, by authoritarianism. Let's chuck it and try something more honest<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> This paper is a lot less controversial now than it would have been thirty or forty years ago (though even today it is controversial enough). The coercive criteria of meaning suggested by Wittgenstein, Dummett, Rorty and other post-positivists are nowadays simply ignored though they are seldom directly challenged. Two philosophers who in some degree anticipate my arguments are Williamson, 2006 and Dearden 2005.

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