

Language and Idealism

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Abstract

In the philosophical inquiry adopted by logical empiricists, analysis of scientific language becomes something similar to a metaphysical endeavor which is meant to establish the bounds of sense, and this stance may be easily traced back to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. On the other hand, the analytic tradition transferred this conception to the analysis of ordinary language, and this move, eventually, was able to restore the confidence of many philosophers in their own work. After all they were doing something important and worthwhile, that is to say, something no one else was doing, since linguists are certainly concerned with language, but from quite a different point of view.

At this point we may well ask ourselves: *What* is wrong with this kind of approach, given the present crisis of the analytic tradition and the growing success of the so-called postanalytic thought? At first sight it looks perfectly legitimate and, moreover, it produced important results, as anybody can verify just reading the masterpieces of contemporary analytic philosophy. To answer the question: *What is wrong?*, we must first of all take into account language itself and check what it is meant to be within the analytic tradition. This will give our question a clear answer. We have to verify, furthermore, what kind of knowledge philosophy needs to be equipped with if it wants to preserve its autonomy. The logical positivists clearly claimed in their program that there is no synthetic *a priori* knowledge such as the one envisioned by Immanuel Kant. There is, however, an analytic and *a priori* knowledge which is supplied by mathematics and logic alone. Within this field, the techniques of contemporary formal logic are exalted because they allow us to build artificial languages which - at least theoretically - eliminate the ambiguities of everyday speech.

Keywords: language; philosophy of language; metaphysics; ontology; epistemology; logical empiricism.

Introduction

Richard Rorty claims that the linguistic turn was an attempt to find a substitute for Kant's transcendental standpoint.¹ He is right in this respect, but I also think that it would be better to speak of a 'natural continuation' of the Kantian viewpoint. The question to be asked now is the following: What are the philosophers supposed

¹ R. Rorty, 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Reification of Language', in: C. Guignon (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 337-57).

to do if the vision of philosophical work endorsed by logical positivism is correct? It is clear, in fact, that we cannot invent an activity just to allow philosophers to have a job and survive: this is, after all, a matter of intellectual honesty. In other words, *if* logical positivists and the large majority of analytic thinkers are right, ie., *if* philosophy has been completely displaced by science so that it no longer is a kind of knowledge independent of the scientific one, *then* we are bound to conclude that there is no need for philosophy any more.

According to the neopositivists, the sole true knowledge is empirical and based on immediate observative data; furthermore, they reject the Kantian synthetic *a priori*, even though Kant's influence on their philosophical outlook is quite strong. As we hinted previously, they attribute a pivotal role to formal logic because, in their opinion, it allows us to formalize in a rigorous manner the intuitive inferential processes of ordinary language. In our day logical positivism is less popular than it used to be until a few decades ago, although maintaining a considerable influence (not only in Great Britain and North America, but in continental Europe as well). The so-called 'postempiricist turn' questioned practically every single point of its general outlook on philosophy and the world (an outlook that is often defined as the *received view*, just to stress the fact that, despite its many shortcomings, it is the starting point of a trend of thought whose importance within contemporary philosophy cannot be denied). In my view, however, it is not correct to claim - as many contemporary authors do - that the neopositivists are *completely* wrong. This is clearly an overstatement, because the members of the Vienna Circle - along with their German and Polish allies of the Berlin Circle and of the Lvov-Warsaw School - can at least be credited with one great merit: they compelled philosophers to take science seriously into account in a period when it was largely believed that philosophy and science are totally independent fields of inquiry.

If we try to identify the position of logical positivism in the map of contemporary philosophy, we will soon find out that it can be characterized by a few basic and radical theses:

(A) first, neopositivism is not a philosophical system but, rather, a general *attitude* towards philosophy which denies any validity to the way philosophical work has been carried out in the past centuries;

(B) second, the logical positivists think that philosophy is not a speculative discipline: it is, rather, a logico-linguistic activity aimed at clarifying scientific propositions;

(C) third, there are only analytic (*a priori*) and synthetic (*a posteriori*) propositions. The first class is formed by logical and mathematical sentences, and the second by the sentences that can be found in the empirical sciences (where physics has a predominant role). As we said before, there is no Kantian 'synthetic *a priori*'.

It follows that the whole of human knowledge can be reduced to the two classes of sentences just mentioned, and this means that the only possible knowledge is given by science. Metaphysics becomes thus meaningless, because its sentences do not comply with the rules set forth by logical analysis of language. What, then, is the philosopher's job? The members of the Vienna Circle answer that his task is to clarify the concepts used within empirical and formal sciences, while analytic philosophers stress instead the importance of ordinary language's analysis. But the outcome is in both cases clear: philosophy *is* linguistic analysis. It may be observed that neopositivism certainly has some ancestors in the history of philosophy: the sophists of ancient Greece like Protagoras, the nominalists of the Middle Ages like Ockham, the classical British empiricists (and especially Hume), the positivists of the 19th century like Comte. Their radicalism, however, is rather new. The logical positivists want to rebuild philosophy *ab initio*, just making *tabula rasa* of what has been said and done in many centuries of philosophical speculation. And their attitude is based on two undeniable facts:

(a) the enormous results, both speculative (knowledge of empirical reality) and practical (technological applications) accomplished by modern science from Galileo on; and

(b) the spectacular achievements of formal logic which, starting from Frege and Russell, set forth the project of accomplishing the Leibnizian dream of the *calculemus*, i.e., the complete formalization and mechanization of human reasoning.

The metaphysical assumptions of logical empiricism

Let us now display some metaphysical tenets which, although unconsciously endorsed by the neopositivists, are not usually taken seriously into account. If we examine the famous distinction between pseudo-problems (which are, more or less, all those problems addressed to by traditional philosophy) and the true ones, it is easy to realize that, according to neopositivism, the difference between philosophy and science is the same difference holding between *language* on the one side, and the *world* described by language on the other. My thesis is that we can identify here a clear Kantian descent. Kant's work, while showing that metaphysics - conceived of in scientific terms - is impossible, linked science to the perceptual and conceptual characteristics of human experience. Acting that way, the philosopher of Königsberg hoped to avoid both the skeptical doubts put forward by David Hume and the metaphysical excesses often endorsed by the rationalists. It may be noted, however, that by limiting scientific discourse to a domain explicitly identified with *appearance*, Kant's writings prompted a growing interest in the *transcendent* domain which, if we take his words seriously, must exist somewhere beyond appearance itself.

The neopositivists, on the other hand, meant to solve this problem by rejecting the Kantian ‘synthetic a priori’, and by reducing all knowledge to (i) purely empirical and (ii) purely linguistic factors, with nothing else left behind. The founder of the Vienna Circle, Moritz Schlick, claimed that between philosophy and science there is no conflict, but just a differentiation of their respective fields of inquiry: philosophy looks for *meaning*, and science is interested in *truth*. It follows that philosophers must only concern themselves with clarifying the meaning of scientific sentences, thus reconstructing the language of science in a clear and rigorous manner. Scientists, in turn, use language in order to ascertain the truth (or falsity) of those sentences concerning the world, and build theories which must be empirically verifiable.

What happens, then, if physicists want to discover the meanings of the assertions that are made within their discipline? According to the neopositivist doctrine, if they do that, they become *ipso facto* philosophers. But on the other hand philosophers, in determining both the nature and the extension of meaningful discourse, set up the boundaries of scientific inquiry, and this means, more or less, that philosophers themselves establish the *conceptual limits* of scientific inquiry. At this point nobody can deny that this is an extremely important job: the philosopher, in fact, becomes a kind of *super-scientist*. He *bestows meaning*, and any operative scientist is practically compelled to ask for his - the philosopher’s - opinion.

Let now ask ourselves: What does logico-linguistic analysis become *if* it is conceived of in these terms? The answer is that it becomes something which is enormously more important than the mere scrutiny of terms and sentences. It turns out to be a sort of *first philosophy*, ie., a super-discipline which is meant to establish the conditions that make all knowledge possible. If we, for some reason, do not want to call it ‘metaphysics’, a different name may still be found for it. But it is quite clear that the substance of the argumentation does not change. And, in fact, in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* we find the following claims:

Philosophy settles controversies about the limits of natural science. It must set limits to what can be thought; and, in doing so, to what cannot be thought. It must set limits to what cannot be thought by working outwards through what can be thought. It will signify what cannot be said, by presenting clearly what can be said.²

If this is the situation, it becomes evidently misleading to speak of a ‘far’ Kantian descent. Kant’s presence in the neopositivist theoretical building is, instead, well-perceivable, and any difference must be attributed, in the final analysis, to the changes occurring in the historical context. So we find a *first* analogy between the Kantian reaction to rationalism and the neopositivist and analytic reaction to idealism. We also find a *second* analogy between Kant’s desire to save scientific knowledge from

² L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, ed. by A. J. Ayer (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961, 4.113-4.114-4.115, p. 49).

Hume's skeptical doubts and the analytic attempt to assure safe logical foundations to that same knowledge. Not only that. More generally, we may recall that for Kant the perception of reality is possible only if it is somehow *mediated* by conceptualization: our knowledge of the world always needs the application of categories, which in turn give shape to human experience. By adopting such an approach, it is no longer possible to speak of an *absolute* knowledge of reality, but only of a type of knowledge which is necessarily *relative to* our conceptual apparatus.

Exactly the same preoccupation is common to neopositivist and analytic philosophers, with only one important difference. For Kant the conceptual apparatus filtering experience is located in human intellect, while the analytic philosophers of our century locate it in *language*. In both cases we have preconditions of knowledge: categories for Kant and language for the analytic tradition. So we are entitled to claim that contemporary analytic philosophy replaces the Kantian question: *What are the conditions that make human knowledge possible?* with the following - and rather similar - query: *What are the conditions that make meaningful discourse possible?* Since the philosopher's task is just to answer this second question, the philosophical activity of bestowing meaning becomes - as Moritz Schlick used to claim - the beginning and the end of all knowledge. And it may even be noted that the problems foreseen by Kant about the possibility of mapping our conceptualizations onto reality-in-itself find a precise correspondence in the problems - underlined by neopositivist and analytic thinkers - concerning the possibility of mapping the characteristics of linguistic systems onto the reality they purport to name and describe.

But, at this point, the objections to the Kantian outlook are, *mutatis mutandis*, the same objections that can be addressed to linguistic philosophy. We can in fact claim that Kant, by posing limits to knowledge, assumed *de facto* the existence of something that lies beyond those limits. Similarly - as Wittgenstein, for instance, pointed out - to set up limits to meaningful discourse implies, *ipso facto*, assuming the existence of something that transcends those limits. We can thus conclude that, while according to Kant our knowledge of the world is relative to human conceptualization and categorization, for the analytic tradition this same knowledge, on a par with the meaningfulness of any discourse regarding the world, is relative to *language*. By choosing this path, conceptualization is transferred from human nature to language, and such a move is very important because it guarantees - theoretically, at least - the logical independence of the new linguistic philosophy not only from the old metaphysics, but also from natural science. This strategy favours, in particular, the detachment of philosophical inquiry from all kinds of psychological introspection, as Ludwig Wittgenstein underlines once again in his *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*:

Psychology is no more closely related to philosophy than any other natural science (...)
Does not my study of sign-language correspond to the study of thought-processes,

which philosophers used to consider so essential to the philosophy of logic? Only in most cases they got entangled in unessential psychological investigations.³

The antimetaphysical stance of linguistic philosophy is thus based on the assumption that our knowledge of the world is always relative to language and to our conceptual schemes, and the 'Kantian flavour' of this position is neatly perceivable in a famous metaphor introduced by Otto Neurath, one of the founding fathers of the Vienna Circle. According to Neurath, in fact, we are all embarked since our birth on a sort of *conceptual ship*; if one wants to modify this ship, one cannot set ashore, but is rather compelled to rebuild it bit by bit in the open sea. This means that human beings cannot modify their conceptual schemes in order to make them more suitable to an - alleged - external reality, since this same reality (the world) turns out to be perceivable *only* through conceptual schemes. It is here that we find the roots of what I call *linguistic idealism*, a theme about which we shall have more to say later on. It is not possible, therefore, to justify language by appealing to what reality is; adopting such a strategy, we are likely to return immediately to some old brand of metaphysics that, as it was already pointed out, is for analytic philosophy a bunch of sentences devoid of meaning. And Neurath's metaphor is, as we shall see later, very important for understanding the theses (or, at least, their early formulation) of a philosopher like W.V. Quine, who says in this regard:

It is meaningless, I suggest, to inquire into the absolute correctness of a conceptual scheme as a mirror of reality. Our standard for appraising basic changes of conceptual scheme must be, not a realistic standard of correspondence to reality, but a pragmatic standard (on this theme see Duhem). Concepts are language, and the purpose of concepts and of language is efficacy in communication and in prediction. Such is the ultimate duty of language, science, and philosophy, and it is in relation to that duty that a conceptual scheme has finally to be appraised.⁴

It is correct to claim, at this point, that the purported analytic elimination of metaphysics is more theoretical than real. The absoluteness of traditional metaphysical questions like: 'What is the structure of reality?', 'Of what does it really consist?', has a punctual correspondence in the absoluteness of such linguistic questions as: 'What is the structure of our language?', 'What entities can we talk about?' The analytic tradition turned, in sum, the metaphysical absoluteness into a linguistic one, and this explains why Rudolf Carnap - just to take a famous example - meant to translate the traditional metaphysical and ontological assertions into sentences concerning the syntactic and semantic structure of language. And so, any sentence about *what there is* corresponds to a sentence about what *we say* there is. In Carnapian terms, the sentences of the

³ L. Wittgenstein, *Ibid.*, 4.1121, p. 49.

⁴ W. V. Quine, 'Identity, Ostension, and Hypostasis', in: W. V. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963, p. 79).

metaphysical/ontological object-language must be translated into sentences belonging to the meta-language of a philosophy conceived of as mere linguistic analysis.⁵

It is obvious, however, that this stance is nothing but the linguistic translation of metaphysical positions quite common in the history of Western philosophical thought. On the one hand, the possibility of pronouncing meaningful statements on an alleged extralinguistic reality is denied, but, on the other, we are supposed to pronounce definitive truths on the way in which we describe that same reality. According to this view, men would be unable to take directly into account the categories of existence, but would at the same time be able to examine in absolute terms their linguistic representations of reality. It is not difficult to understand that by acting that way the analytic philosophers, far from 'eliminating' metaphysics, give rise to their own brand of metaphysics, with only one very important *caveat*: the world conceived of as reality, the Aristotelian being-*qua*-being, is replaced by Language (which must be written now with a capital *L*), thus going back to some form of rationalism. The alleged elimination of metaphysics through logical analysis of language is, therefore, a mere illusion, and it is much better to turn our attention, instead, to the symmetry existing between the analytic outlook and the positions endorsed by many traditional metaphysicians. No matter what the analytic thinkers claim, we have once again a distinction - in most cases *unconscious* - between science and metaphysics. As we observed previously, the analyst of language gives rise to a kind of first philosophy which is meant to bestow meaning on human knowledge conceived as a whole. And thus a growing gap appears between *practical-operative* scientific activity on the one hand, and linguistic analysis on the other. Abstract and purely speculative problems are privileged by many analytic philosophers, including traditional metaphysical and ontological problems which are now taken into account using the tools of formal logic and of the logical analysis of language. It is not at all surprising, thus, that the analytic thinkers have in most cases become the *linguistic counterparts* of those metaphysicians they originally meant to fight and destroy.

Within the analytic tradition, old distinctions are re-proposed which have always been objects of inquiry in traditional metaphysics: for instance the distinction between platonists and nominalists. The clarification of the traditional philosophical problems obtained thanks to the linguistic turn, in other words, does not succeed in hiding the much more important fact that many old quarrels show up again within the analytic field. Let us only mention the dispute about the opportunity of using a nominalist or a platonist language in the philosophy of logic and mathematics. This is not a merely linguistic controversy but, rather, the re-proposal of problems thriving already in ancient and medieval philosophy. The step toward recognizing that metaphysics, after all, cannot be eliminated, is rather short.

⁵ R. Carnap, *Meaning and Necessity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947). This theme was also developed by Polish thinkers like T. Kotarbinski and K. Ajdukiewicz.

Carnap's answer is that the analytic discussions about platonism and nominalism do not regard the problem of the existence of universals, but rather the choice of which language is more useful for dealing with themes related to the foundations of mathematics. It is evident, however, that this answer is far from being satisfactory. Platonists and nominalists fight each other not for linguistic reasons, but because they do not agree on what kinds of entities have to be admitted into *ontology*. The real nature of the dispute is ontological and metaphysical, and not linguistic. So the antimetaphysical stance turns out to be more an 'ideological prejudice' (just to borrow a term belonging to political philosophy) than a thesis which can be reasonably argued for.

It may then be noted that the absolutism of the analytic conception of language, which is based on the thesis that our talk about the world is meaningful only in so far as it is referred to some system of linguistic representation, practically assumes that language itself is *not* a part of the world. In other terms, we must ask a question that neopostivist and analytic philosophers tend - strangely - to ignore: *How* was language born and *where* does it come *from*? This is one of the reasons why Quine (or, at least, the Quine of the 1950s) rejects the analytic/synthetic distinction insisting, instead, on language conceived of as a *tool* created by mankind for practical purposes.⁶ The early Quine, thus, overcomes the strictures of a purely analytic conception of language resorting to the pragmatist - and typically American - tradition represented by thinkers like Charles S. Peirce and John Dewey.

Let us conclude this section by noting that, despite what many authors nowadays keep saying, (i) metaphysics has not been eliminated, and (ii) logical analysis of language may instead be extremely useful for examining the traditional metaphysical problems in a more precise manner. This explains why, within the analytic school itself, a great deal of attention is currently paid to such old problems as the platonism/nominalism distinction, the status of modal propositions and the meaning of negative existential sentences.⁷

Quine and the primacy of language

If there is at all an analytically oriented philosopher who often writes about ontology, it is Quine. Throughout his writings, in fact, we constantly find the following question: 'What kinds of objects do exist?' On the other hand the so-called 'ontic decision', that is the decision concerning what objects should be admitted into ontology, is the cornerstone of his philosophical quest. A central position has been given to these

⁶ See especially his famous essay 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism', in: Willard V. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, cit., pp. 20-46.

⁷ See another famous essay by Quine: 'On What There Is', in: W. V. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, cit., pp. 1-19. A clear example of analytic metaphysics is given by the well-known book by A. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974). See also the recent volume by P. F. Strawson, *Analysis and Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

problems in Quine's works since the late 1930s, and important formulations may be found in such writings as 'On What There Is', *Word and object* and 'Ontological Relativity'. Given this fact, one would be inclined to think that in those works a precise and well-constructed ontology can be found. The real situation, however, does not meet these expectations.

Quine firmly believes that ontological problems can be addressed (and eventually solved) *only* by means of symbolic logic. But one has to be very careful in pronouncing such a statement. I do not mean to deny that formal logic is a very important tool when ontological questions are coped with, since this fact may be easily recognized by anyone trained in analytic philosophy. In Quine's view, however, the above mentioned statement is much stronger, since he claims sometimes that ontological problems *are*, at bottom, logical and linguistic matters: standard quantification theory, and in particular existentially quantified sentences, are in his opinion the ontological idiom *par excellence*. It follows that, should we not possess first order logic, we would not even be able to express ontological questions properly.

This is indeed a tough-minded position, and it takes us back to the relationship between *language* and the *world* which plays a crucial role in logical positivism and in the analytic tradition at large. Why does Quine assume such a stance? In order to answer this question, one must be audacious enough to challenge Frege's paradigm which identifies *existence* on the one side and *logical quantification* on the other, a challenge that very few authors today feel inclined to make.⁸ In fact, Quine is one of the champions of this identification of existence with standard logical quantification, a very important move indeed, since it was - and still is - endorsed by the absolute majority of the authors belonging to the analytic tradition. So, if we want to answer the question posed above, I think that there are two possible replies, which are in turn interconnected:

(A) Only formal logic can adequately describe reality, and

(B) It is impossible to make a distinction between logic, language and reality.

But the real question at stake here is no doubt the following:

(C) Is there a world (reality) independent of the language we use for *talking about* reality?

Let us note that Quine underlines, here and there in his writings, that this - ie., (C) - is precisely the problem we have to solve in order to get a satisfactory comprehension

⁸ See for example the book by A. Orenstein, *Existence and the Particular Quantifier* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), in which the author argues that existence is not a matter of logical quantification, and the article by N. Rescher, 'The Equivocality of Existence', in: *Studies in Ontology*, 'American Philosophical Quarterly Monograph Series', no. 12 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978, pp. 57-66).

of what ontology is and what it means to formulate ontological questions. And in fact, when posing existential problems in his works, Quine always adopts this formulation:

(D) May we use a term x without presupposing, by that same fact, the *existence* of the entity (object) named by x ?

In other words, what worries him is the possibility that a speaker uses non-denoting or general terms just believing that there is something real named by them. But - we may ask - are those really *ontological* problems? It seems to me that they are, instead, logical and linguistic ones. For example, I may find someone believing in the existence of winged horses. If he tells me that Pegasus exists, in order to show him that this statement is incorrect I will not use quantification theory but, rather, I invite him to pursue an empirical recognition. It may turn out, at some point, that he believes in the existence of mental entities, thus rendering a direct empirical recognition quite hard. Even in that case, though, we may agree on the fact that mythological texts report many stories about Pegasus and winged horses. Provided I am ready to accept an extended ontology including all kinds of mythological objects, I may also concede that the sentence 'Pegasus is the winged horse of Bellerophon' is true, while the sentence 'Pegasus is the winged horse of Hercules' is false. I may subsequently formalize those two sentences using first order logic, but this move will neither solve nor add anything to the question whether there *really* are winged horses or not. The solution, in fact, depends on two facts:

- (1) My interlocutor's ability to find winged horses in the world; and
- (2) His (and my) background ontological assumptions; if he is an empiricist, he will make one claim, and if he is a mentalist he will make yet another claim.

The fact of the matter is that mathematical logic allows us to formalize the two sentences in a clear manner but, on the other hand, it offers no solution to the philosophical problem we are interested in, since the existential quantifier (or particular, if we adopt a substitutional interpretation of the quantifiers) is a purely formal tool and not an ontological one. The same applies to scientific reasoning: certainly first order logic does not tell us whether non-observable entities really exist or not (that is, the fact that we talk about them is no guarantee of their existence).

Going back to Quine's theses, it is difficult to find in his writings a clear distinction between what is logical (linguistic) and what is empirical. He certainly did write a lot about what there is, but never gives us a chance to find out whether, in his opinion, there really is a world independent of the language we use for *talking about* the world (and we will see later that sometimes he seems to endorse, in this regard, rather incompatible positions). Language, thus, assumes an ontological dimension which is not acceptable if we take language to be not an *a priori* element, but rather a socially,

historically and culturally determined instrument which merely refers to reality. I think that if we follow Quine's style of reasoning we are not in the domain of ontology (whose boundaries are given by the search for what there is), but rather in the domain of formal logic, and the two domains, notwithstanding the opinion of many important analytic philosophers, are in my opinion by no means identical. If we pose the previous questions in a Quinean style, all we can do is to find out that non-denoting singular terms like 'Pegasus' or general terms like 'centaur' do not work - in language - as usual names do. No doubt this is an important result, but its consequences regard formal logic and the philosophical analysis of ordinary language, and not ontology.

It is thus difficult to understand how one may determine the existence (or the non-existence) of certain objects adopting Quine's point of view. We can find a possible solution to this puzzling problem if - and only if - the existence of an external reality independent of any knowing subject is questioned. It would therefore be necessary to adopt a *different* notion of reality, inextricably connected with language and such that its meaningfulness coincides with our capacity to express it at the linguistic level. And in fact he gives, here and there, hints in this direction: sometimes he claims that 'ontology is *internal to* language'. But at this point we must underline a very important fact: Quine does not even seem to be conscious of the just mentioned implication which logically follows from his treatment of the ontological problems. Indeed we find, here and there in his essays, scattered remarks on the relationship between language and the world. None of these remarks, however, is clear and precise enough to offer a sound foundation for the existential questions. Quine looks satisfied with his logical formalizations and does not try to go deeper in the purely philosophical background of his theses.

Let us note, by the way, that our philosopher always claims that he is a convinced empiricist, and this is the reason why he is so often prisoner of two alternatives which seem incompatible:

(1) On the one side he supports a strong version of empiricism, according to which reality is simply (and *only*) what we can have experience of from the sensory viewpoint; but,

(2) on the other, he supports a sort of logical and linguistic realism, according to which reality is simply (and *only*) what we are able to express within our language adequately modified by recourse to logical formalization (first order logic).

Quine never succeeds in clarifying this important issue: he does not even try to, probably because he does not have a clear perception of the difficulty of putting together the two alternatives just mentioned. His neopositivist legacy takes him to a form of radical empiricism, while his logical realism brings him in quite a different direction. As we said previously, much the same can be said about many representatives of logical

positivism itself: despite their official anti-metaphysical attitude, logical positivists created one of the most fascinating metaphysics of our century.⁹

In any event, only by taking this inner tension into account is it possible to make sense of Quine's claim that Pegasus does not exist because the term 'Pegasus' does not work as a real name when it is encapsulated in a sentence. It follows - in his opinion - that we must resist the temptation to adopt an 'overcrowded' ontology. But I must stress that the attempt to base ontology on this sort of *linguistic/aesthetic* preference looks very strange: if reality were truly overcrowded from the ontological viewpoint, would it follow - according to Quine - that we should give priority to his (or even our) linguistic/aesthetic preferences rather than to the ontological structure of reality itself? Maybe Ockham's razor, after all, is not such a good ontological criterion: why should we decide to simplify, following our personal taste and opinions, a reality which is itself complex?

What objects, then, are we allowed to admit into our ontology? It is clear, in fact, that at least some objects do exist. Since according to Quine we cannot admit possible objects, meanings, intensional and abstract entities, what remains to be done is to determine the scope of our *ontological commitment*. Quine's answer is the following: the existence of any object is *relative to* the language we speak, and is therefore *based on* such a language. If this is the situation, it would seem to follow that there are no objects independent of the language we use to talk about them and that, furthermore, there are no objects independent of the linguistic terms which denote them (although, as we shall see later, in many occasions Quine seems to hold a different position). Physical objects, thus, become postulated entities that help us organize the flux of experience. The solution to all these problems might be found, perhaps, substituting the word 'ontology' with the expression 'logical universe of discourse', but Quine never makes such a move, and so we are back once again to the alternative previously mentioned:

(E) Either language and reality are the same thing, or

(F) Language and reality, even though they do not coincide completely, are so inextricably connected that it is impossible to distinguish one from the other.

No wonder, then, that when Quine writes or talks about ontology, he always refers to language. Since the existence of objects is determined by the language one speaks, any decision concerning ontological problems implies the clarification of which ontological commitments are embedded in a particular language, and this, in turn, means that speakers of different languages assume (or may assume) *different* ontological commitments, so that ontology is internal to language as we said before.

⁹ The reference work in this case still is G. Bergmann's *The Metaphysics of Logical Positivism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967, 2nd ed.).

Note, by the way, that at this point we begin to identify the roots of Quine's influence on the current scientific antirealism and, more generally, the roots of the great influence that philosophy of language today exerts on philosophy of science. The alleged incommensurability of scientific theories, in fact, stems also (and it may be said even 'mainly') from such ideas.

Ontology, thus, can be adopted according to our particular preferences. Reality poses no burdens and no limits, and any ontic decision is a linguistic one (that is, linguistic in character). It is not an alleged objective reality that tells us what ontology to adopt, but it is instead the language we speak that plays this fundamental role. True: Quine claims that the adoption of an ontology obeys pragmatic requirements but, still, it is *language* that takes us in this direction. Let us now go back to our previous remarks on the language/world relationship according to Quine, because it is a fact that the situation depicted in his works is not as clear as I have thus far described it. Despite his deep interest in ontological problems, in fact, Quine's works sometimes present statements that do not seem easily reconcilable. In an important essay entitled 'Existence', our author makes the following claims:

Which ontology to ascribe to a man depends on what he does or intends with his variables and quantifiers. This second appeal to language is no more to be wondered at than the first; *for what is in question in both cases is not just what there really is, but what someone says or implies that there is. Nowhere in all this should there be any suggestion that what there is depends on language.*¹⁰

It should be noted that, according to Quine, formal logic determines ontology: there is no other way to make sense of his statement that 'Which ontology to ascribe to a man depends on what he does or intends with his variables and quantifiers'. And this confirms, once again, that in his view ontology is relative to language. Subsequently, however, I underlined the last two sentences of the quotation because I think that, in this case, the distinction between reality and language is pretty clear or, at least, it is clear that Quine is *not* - in this context - identifying reality and language. This means however that, if we adopt his strategy (which, as we said earlier, is based on standard quantification theory), we remain at the linguistic level without touching the properly ontological one, in the sense that we just cannot step outside the barrier posed by our language; and, in fact, Quine's ontological commitment is not about what there is, but about what a true theory *claims* that there is. Quine, in the essay mentioned above, recognises - although confusedly - that *there is* an ontological level which cannot be identified with the linguistic (logical) one. This is confirmed by what he claims soon afterwards:

¹⁰ W. V. Quine, 'Existence', in: W. Yourgrau, A. D. Breck (eds.). *Physics, Logic, and History* (New York-London: Plenum Press, 1970, p. 94, Italics supplied).

What are we to say of the ontic commitment of a New Guinea aborigine - what are the purported values of his variables? I hold that there is in general no unique translation, not even unique in respect to ontic commitment, let alone logical style. I hold that our distinctively referential apparatus (...) belongs in an essential respect to the theoretical part of our language: namely, it is underdetermined by all possible sensory stimulation. A result, or really another way of stating the point, is that our referential apparatus is subject to indeterminacy of translation. That is, translations not equivalent to each other could be reconciled with all behavior (...) It may in this sense be said that ontological questions are parochial to our culture. This is not to say that a thing may exist for one culture and be non-existent for another. *Existence is absolute, and those who talk of existence can say so.* What is parochial is the talking of it.¹¹

So - I think we may conclude - after all there is an external reality which does not depend on language. Let us see, then, if it is possible to detect a definition of it in Quine's works. We can find there two different concepts of reality; neither of them, however, is defined in clear terms.

(1) In a first sense, reality is composed by objects which, although not well-defined, are similar to common sense objects that we perceive through our sensory apparatus. The task of language is to *differentiate* reality into particular objects, and from this it follows that, whenever talking about reality, we always do it *relatively to* language.

(2) In a second sense, however, reality appears less determined and more confused, since it may be assimilated to a sort of *raw material* that produces the flux of experience or, to put it in another way, a sort of *substratum* that supports the sensible qualities of material things.

In both cases the notion of 'ontology' is by no means clear. Should we adopt notion (1) or notion (2), or maybe both, but how? In Quine's view (or at least the first one, reported in the aforementioned quotation) ontological talk rises when the human mind - which cannot be clearly distinguished from language - gives an order to the disordered fragments of raw experience which, in turn, are given to us by the just mentioned 'substratum'. This notion closely recalls a concept of 'non-differentiated reality' similar to the Kantian one. We know, however, that Quine rejects any distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori*: he believes that any kind of ordering whatsoever cannot be separated by the act of theorising (which, in his view, is tantamount to talking). In fact, he claims in 'On What There Is':

Our acceptance of an ontology is, I think, similar in principle to our acceptance of a scientific theory, say a system of physics: we adopt, at least insofar as we are reasonable, the simplest conceptual scheme into which the disordered fragments of raw experience can be fitted and arranged.¹²

¹¹ W. V. Quine, *Ibid.*, pp. 93-4 (Italics supplied).

¹² W. V. Quine, 'On What There Is', in: W. V. Quine, *From A Logical Point of View*, cit., pp. 16-7.

The Quinean 'ontological relativity', then, stems precisely from considerations of this sort. But it must not be forgotten that the roots of the problems we have met thus far lie in Quine's acceptance of Frege's views. According to Frege, existence is a property than can be expressed only in terms of logical quantification (and, more precisely, in terms of existential quantification). It is a property pertaining to concepts, and not to objects. Given this fact, the Fregean treatment of existence is a true turning point if compared to what the preceding philosophical traditions - and, in particular, the Aristotelian one - had claimed.

As I remarked before, I deem it correct to claim that the famed metaphor of the 'conceptual ship' introduced by Otto Neurath plays an absolutely fundamental role in Quine's thought. Let us verify what the American philosopher claims in an essay which first appeared in 1950 in *The Journal of Philosophy*:

The fundamental-seeming philosophical question, How much of our science is merely contributed by language and how much is a genuine reflection of reality? is perhaps a spurious question which itself arises wholly from a certain type of language. Certainly we are in a predicament if we try to answer the question; for to answer the question we must talk about the world as well as about language, and to talk about the world we must already impose upon the world some conceptual scheme peculiar to our own special language. Yet we must not leap to the fatalistic conclusion that we are stuck with the conceptual scheme that we grew up in. We can change it bit by bit, plank by plank, though meanwhile there is nothing to carry us along but the evolving conceptual scheme itself. The philosopher's task was well compared by Neurath to that of a mariner who must rebuild his ship on the open sea. We can improve our conceptual scheme, our philosophy, bit by bit while continuing to depend on it for support; but we cannot detach ourselves from it and compare it objectively with an unconceptualized reality.¹³

Furthermore, it is worth stressing that Neurath's metaphor plays a central role not only in Quine's thought, but in the entire speculation of the logical positivists and of most analytic philosophers as well. There is a clear Kantian heritage here: we can never know reality-in-itself (ie., more or less, the *noumena*), but can nonetheless know reality as we *say* it is (ie., the *phenomena*). This sort of Kantian dualism is precisely the source of many of the problems with which Quine, logical positivists and analytic thinkers cope. Because if we assume that we can never reach reality-in-itself, it is obvious that our conceptual schemes are only bound to determine what reality is *for us*, and it is clear, too, that the language we speak becomes something much more important than a simple instrument for *referring to* a reality which is non-linguistic in character. The problem is twofold:

(a) do we really need to assume that there is an unbridgeable gap between reality as it is and reality as we know and talk about it ?, and

¹³ W. V. Quine, 'Identity, Ostension and Hypostasis', in: W. V. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, cit., pp. 78-9.

(b) how justified is it to claim that we can never reach reality-in-itself?

Obviously priority must be given to question (a), since question (b) disappears as long as we stop answering in the affirmative to question (a). Thus, even analytic philosophers and, in general, linguistically oriented thinkers must face the Kantian heritage. The problem in this case, as I already hinted at before, is that most of them depict themselves as empiricists, while a careful scrutiny of their theses clearly shows that they are what I define 'linguistic idealists'.

Linguistic idealism

I would like to make clear, at this point, that I do not attach an intrinsically negative meaning to the term 'idealism'; such a move, besides being philosophically improper, is bound to disregard the important fact that idealism is a philosophical doctrine that can be reasonably argued for. My claim is, instead, that no one should be allowed to declare officially that he is an empiricist, while his theses show that he is actually giving an idealistic picture of reality. Unfortunately such is the case with many important analytic thinkers nowadays, and I have already argued in this work that this is true even of an author like Willard V. Quine, who is commonly regarded as the champion of empiricism within today philosophy.

This fact can be better understood if we remember that both logical positivism and the analytic tradition have always been tremendously ambiguous on the real nature of the relationship between *language* on the one side and the *world* (reality) on the other. The standard interpretation of logical positivism and of the analytic tradition claims that linguistic analysis is the best way we have at our disposal for getting rid of both metaphysics and any non-empiricist interpretation of reality. *If* it were so, it would be correct to say that linguistic analysis is the most effective antiidealistic method devised by 20th century philosophy. But this picture, although still widespread and successful nowadays, is both inaccurate and misleading. For it does not take into account the essential fact that the linguistic turn, despite the strong empiricist and antimetaphysical commitments of its founding fathers, has increasingly viewed language as an *a priori* element which, in turn, determines and even *builds up* reality. Many analytic thinkers - especially in the last few decades - have taken an even bolder stance, proclaiming that reality *is* language, so that, for instance, it is our conceptual schemes that determine reality.

At this point the shadow of Immanuel Kant comes on the stage once again. According to the main representatives of logical positivism, the philosopher's task is to find out what the nature and the extension of any meaningful discourse are and, in so doing, he sets the limits of scientific inquiry itself. As we said before speaking of the metaphysical tenets of logical positivism, the philosopher thus becomes a sort of 'super-scientist'

who determines the bounds of sense, and practicing scientists must rely on his advice to find out whether their work is meaningful or not. Linguistic analysis, therefore, becomes a sort of *prima philosophia*, that is to say a super-discipline that determines the conditions which regulate our knowledge. But we must also recall that, according to Kant, no pure perception of reality is possible without the mediation of our ability to conceptualize; the categories are always needed in order to know the world. It follows that no absolute knowledge of reality is ever possible, the only knowledge at our disposal being the one relative to the conceptual apparatus. And while Kant believed that the conceptual apparatus filtering experience is located in human intellect, the analytically oriented thinkers locate it in language. Both, in sum, speak of *preconditions* regulating human knowledge, be they *a priori* categories or language. In both cases, it is philosophy that answers the basic questions, and this fact gives further ground to the thesis I previously stated: the anti-metaphysical stance of logical positivism and of the analytic tradition is more theoretical than real. It looks more like a philosophical slogan than an effective accomplishment.

Just as Kant thought that our knowledge of the world makes sense only with reference to a system of *a priori* categories, so the analytically oriented philosophers deem it correct to say that our discourse about the world may be meaningful only as long as it is referred to a system of linguistic representation. But what is 'language' if we start from these premises? Certainly it is neither a part of the world nor a tool devised by mankind for accomplishing communicative - ie., social - purposes. Language becomes, rather, an *a priori* factor which categorises reality. It makes no sense to ask where it comes from, because its connection to reality is something inexplicable. And, taking that path, sooner or later one is bound to conclude that language and reality are exactly the same thing, a position that many representatives of the analytic tradition are actually endorsing in the present day. They are simply developing the Kantian position in a consistent manner - as the classical idealists did in the 19th century - shifting the attention from epistemology to philosophy of language and the theory of meaning. All this is confirmed by the following - and very interesting - remarks put forward by David Pears:

Wittgenstein's leading idea was that we can see further than we can say. We can see all the way to the edge of language, but the most distant things that we see cannot be expressed in sentences because they are the preconditions of saying anything.¹⁴

Note how close this notion of 'preconditions' is to the Kantian one. We may wonder, however, why it is necessary to suppose that there is such an unbridgeable gap between what can be said and what can be seen. And, furthermore, why should we assume the notion of the *edge of language* to be real and correct? It seems to me that many of the analytic tradition's basic theses rest, once again, on a notion of language conceived

¹⁴ D. Pears, *The False Prison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

of as a super-natural (ie., *a priori*) factor. If we reject this notion, sense-conditions are no longer 'ineffable', because they must be traced back to reality conceived of as a whole of which man is just a small part. And this means that the doctrine of the *limits of language* is likely to take us up a blind alley (although it is fascinating from a purely philosophical viewpoint).

It is well-known that the question of linguistic idealism has been addressed already by several analytic authors who dealt with Wittgenstein's thought.¹⁵ In their writings, however, the term 'idealism' is used in a non-standard sense, which has little to do with what we have said thus far. They, in fact, somehow connect idealism with solipsism, but why should we think that solipsism and idealism are connected, or that solipsism is a probable (or even necessary) outcome of an idealist outlook on reality? It seems to me, thus, that many representatives of the analytic tradition do not use the term 'idealism' in its classical meaning. To me, all this looks rather strange, because I do not see how, say, Hegel's or Gentile's idealism may be found to be equivalent to some kind of solipsism. For this reason, the articles mentioned in the note below are not taken into account in this context.

Epilogue

The logical empiricists cleverly realised that modern science has pushed philosophy into a corner from which it is difficult to come out safely. So, they reacted by finding a job specifically devised for philosophers, ie., analysis of language, and afterwards they proceeded to transform linguistic analysis into a sort of new metaphysics which is supposed to provide philosophers with *normative* rules (obviously set forth by the logical positivists themselves). At this point philosophy was certainly saved from extinction, but quite a high price - at least from a purely neopositivist viewpoint - had to be paid: that of adopting an unconscious, although very fascinating, new metaphysics.

We already noted before that there is a strict parallelism between a large part of contemporary linguistically oriented philosophy and idealism, and now I want to say something more on this topic. The idealist claims:

(a) we cannot step out of *thought*: if we admit that there is an external reality which transcends thought, then, by the same act of thinking it, this alleged external reality is no longer transcendental. It follows that we can never overcome the cognitive identity between being on the one side, and thought on the other.

But most analytic philosophers would paraphrase (a) in the following manner:

¹⁵ Let us only mention three articles included in an anthology edited by J. V. Canfield: G. E. Anscombe, 'The Question of Linguistic Idealism', in: J. V. Canfield (ed.), *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein. 8: Knowing, Naming, Certainty and Idealism* (New York-London, Garland, 1986, pp. 188-215); N. Malcom, 'Wittgenstein and Idealism', in: J. V. Canfield (ed.), *Ibid.*, pp. 339-57; and B. Williams, 'Wittgenstein and Idealism', in: John V. Canfield (ed.), *Ibid.*, pp. 318-37.

(b) we cannot step out of *language*: if we admit that there is an external reality which transcends language, then, by the same act of talking about it, this alleged external reality is no longer transcendental. It follows that we can never overcome the cognitive identity between being on the one side, and language on the other.

We might say, thus, that for classical idealism whatever is foreign to thought is unknowable, while for the analytic tradition whatever is foreign to language is unknowable as well. But how can we make sense of the idea that there is something uncreated by thought but, at the same time, necessarily connected with it? And just how - we may wonder - can we understand the idea that there is something foreign to language but, at the same time, necessarily connected with it?

As was mentioned previously, we have to bear in mind that language is in the analytic tradition something much more important than the ordinary language we use daily to communicate with other people and to refer to an external reality. Language becomes, more or less, the logical structure of the world, an extremely powerful and *a priori* factor which - borrowing a distinction introduced by Wilfrid Sellars¹⁶ - includes both overt (linguistic) and covert (mental) semantic categories; in this sense language just becomes a variant - although with some original characters - of classical idealism's thought. We can trace the development of this view back to the classics of analytic philosophy, ie. Gottlob Frege, the Ludwig Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, Rudolf Carnap and many others. Philip Kitcher has recently claimed in this regard:

Frege's investigations are commonly viewed as a decisive turn, one that dethroned epistemology from its central position among the philosophical disciplines and that set the philosophy of language in its place. In retrospect, we can trace a great lineage from Frege, leading through Russell, Wittgenstein, and Carnap to the professional philosophy practiced in Britain, North America, Australasia and Scandinavia in the postwar years (...) Frege's opposition to what he perceived as intrusions from psychology or biology is evident from celebrated passages in the *Grundlagen*. The methodological stance he inspired becomes explicit in propositions of the *Tractatus* (...) Anglo-American philosophers have explored a wide range of disciplines, using ideas from psychology, biology, political science, economics, and the arts to reformulate traditional questions in epistemology and metaphysics. Some of their endeavors mark the return of epistemological naturalism, scorned by Frege and labeled as illicit philosophy by Wittgenstein.¹⁷

But let us note that even the later Wittgenstein, notwithstanding the opinion of many authoritative scholars, is not that distant from this conception. Think of his linguistic

¹⁶ W. Sellars, 'Language as Thought and as Communication', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 29 (1969), pp. 506-27. See also W. Sellars, 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind', in: W. Sellars, *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963, ch. 5).

¹⁷ P. Kitcher, 'The Naturalists Return', *The Philosophical Review*, 101 (1992), no. 1, pp. 53-55.

games, a notion through which reality is bound to the very limits of our language. This conception is exactly what Gustav Bergmann has named the 'metaphysics of logical positivism', a metaphysics which is basically shared by the analysts of ordinary language.

We live in a century in which philosophy has been largely dominated by preoccupation with language and linguistic analysis. Not only logical empiricism and analytic philosophy of ordinary language took this stance, but also hermeneutics, whose representatives think that the only job philosophy can perform is interpreting cultural texts. And Wittgenstein himself is not that distant from this trend of thought, particularly when he claims that his philosophical method switches all questions on truth into questions of meaning. This explains well enough why Michael Dummett states that 'The theory of meaning is the foundation of all philosophy, and not epistemology as Descartes led us into believing.'¹⁸ So it seems to me that most of contemporary philosophy became just 'obsessed' with language (which is different from being seriously interested in it), forgetting that linguistic analysis is just one philosophical method out of many. Even man himself has been identified with language, just leaving aside the fact that man came first and language later. Language is in fact recent, as science shows us, and many parts of our personality are guided by non-linguistic criteria.

All this has important consequences on (i) the philosophy of science, (ii) philosophy itself, and (iii) the entire philosophical vision of the world that surrounds us. As language is a relatively new entry in the history of reality, it cannot have any sort of ontological supremacy. Not only is this so: it is likely to hide the non-linguistic dimensions of our human nature while, being restricted to mankind, it cannot explain a very large number of the features of reality as such. Let us then stress that science, instead, always tries to enlarge (and to deepen) as much as possible our vision of reality and, in order to do this, we must push our sight both toward the past - when mankind did not yet exist - and the future - when mankind perhaps will no longer be there. This in turn means trying to get a good comprehension of *reality as a whole*: human and non-human, mental and non-mental, linguistic and non-linguistic. Certainly language has a role in this enterprise, although not a unique one. Trying to reduce an extremely complex reality to something much simpler, this approach cannot even explain *why* language was born and *for what purposes*. Language becomes a sort of divinity which is supposed to explain everything while, since it is a rather mundane and imperfect product of the human mind, it needs indeed to be explained by tracing its origins which, as we said, are both social and practical. So the authors who - like Quine - mean to replace any argument on reality with arguments on human language that talks about reality are bound to miss the richness of reality itself: this is the reason why we need a *semantic descent* replacing Quine's semantic ascent.

¹⁸ M. Dummett, *Frege. Philosophy of Language* (London: Duckworth, 1973, p. 699).

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