

On Scrubbing Away Philosophy: Some Further Considerations about Forms of Life

**Kai Nielsen
The University of Calgary**

I

Wittgenstein does not say that we should, or even can, reform a whole language—to say nothing of all languages—into a Carnap-style ideal language. For Wittgenstein, there can be no ideal language or even any point in reforming language. We cannot reform a whole language: the forms of language which are the forms of life. We just inescapably have that. But that is not to say that in using our ordinary language we can make no piecemeal changes which we might regard as reforms or delete some conceptions, typically, at least in effect, metaphysical or ontological conceptions which impede or block our understanding of our ordinary use. We have no understanding here apart from our ordinary language use or some specialist uses dependent on our ordinary use of language. We should set aside anything which stands in the way of such uses of which our ordinary uses are the most fundamental ones. Indeed, we can intelligibly do no other.

Our forms of language which are our forms of life are crucial here. They cannot be set aside. There is no understanding, no justification, no possibility of analysis without them. We cannot attain intelligibility without them; there is no transcending them without at the same time presupposing them.

However, we can scrub our language confusion free, gainsaying perfect and complete clarity. We must, for what clarification we can get, go piecemeal case by case, relying on our ordinary uses in doing so, for breaking particular blockages. This includes epistemological and

metaphysical blockages which unnecessarily befuddle or puzzle us, often setting us into a stew concerning whether we properly understand how or even whether we can truly or falsely or even intelligibly assert them. Even the most straightforward uses of language such as, 'There is a tree in my backyard', 'I am sleepy', 'People die', 'The tide is coming in' will be thought problematic by philosophers. Some old philosophers, as Hobbes sarcastically remarked, have asserted that we cannot ever be sure that the cat is on the bed or that it is raining. G. E. Moore's assurances that sometimes, indeed many times, we know these things with certainty did not reassure them. Think of the English Hegelians. But things like this have been with us, we philosophers, in one form or another, repeatedly throughout the history of philosophy. Isn't it time that we stop such playing around and stop saying to those who go Moorean that they do not really understand what the skeptical or traditional philosopher is up to, neither the Bradleyian types nor Berkleyian types? There is nothing to understand. It's just disguised nonsense that needs to be seen as nonsense and to be set aside.

Still, that scrubbing is often gained by freeing us from the futile and indeed meaningless task of trying to conceptualize the unconceptual—something the romantics specialized in. An example of this, though not quite so obvious, is feeling the need, a need which cannot be met, to try to conceptualize something that supposedly was the very nature of the world—its essence—and that this was necessary to gain complete clarity. Language does not function that way and cannot be made to. We have no idea of what it would be like for that to be so or how to go about seeking these things. We do not understand what it is to gain complete clarity. That is like something to be timeless time. By failing to understand how our language functions we trick ourselves into gibberish.

Consider, for example, some sentences where someone who utters them is in effect trying to do philosophy. Consider, that is, some sentences that are taken to be crucial and essential to what I have been saying when I speak of someone having integrity. If that were so, some would think it

would reveal the essence, the very nature, of having integrity and that is to have the property or set of properties denoted connoted by the word 'integrity' that are common to and distinctive only of integrity. That property or set of properties connoted by 'integrity' is the essence of integrity. But there is no essence of integrity or of anything else. We should scrub such talk away. When we try to engage in essence-talk of integrity or anything else we get thinly veiled nonsense taking itself to be expository and explicatory. We have something up for dissolution by Wittgensteinian conceptual therapy. That something which with conceptual labor and luck can be dissolved as actual nonsense freeing us there at least from the thrall of philosophy. We will see it is nonsense, but this does not show us that philosophy is nonsense in its entirety, though Wittgenstein rather bitterly think it is. This disguised nonsense is caused by our failure to understand our language-use. We have to scrub out a string of words that do no work in our language or indeed in any language. They do not amount to a proposition or propositions. We do not understand what we are saying when we so talk. We cannot determine whether 'integrity' has a denotation or has a connotation. We cannot determine when, if ever, we have a set of properties which a proper use of 'integrity' has such that we can say that it is integrity's essence. This is and can be true of a lot of words, including crucial descriptive words or words expressing concepts if you will. There are words that are descriptive (which include having what Hilary Putnam calls thick descriptive content) or that have other cognitive content of which we cannot say that they have a denotation or even a connotation. These are words, expressions of conceptions if you will, which have neither a denotation or a connotation. 'Integrity', 'cruelty', 'nakedness', 'sadness', 'stringency', 'freshness', 'tenacity', 'tall', 'rotten', 'rebellious', 'taciturn', 'straight', 'racist' and 'sexist' come randomly but usefully to mind.

If we say all words must have both a denotation and connotation, or at least a connotation, our language would be, to put it mildly, very impoverished. 'Triangle', 'H₂O', 'Vitamin A', and words of chemistry and physics are words that perhaps have both a connotation and denotation. Perhaps they could be called 'essence words'? Some words only have a connotation and *perhaps* some only

a denotation. 'Athlete', 'sailboat', 'tall person', 'drunk' have a denotation but they also have a sense, i.e., a use. But it is unlikely they have a connotation. But great swaths of important words— 'if', 'then', 'not', 'nor'—have neither a connotation nor a denotation. But all these different uses are crucial for there being any natural language. Most words are not alleged or putative essence words like 'triangle' or 'salt' or 'H₂O'. Even when we in specifying what a word means try to rely on properties which we take to be common and distinctive of all the things characteristic of what the word in question signifies or a concept signifies (if you want to be cross-lingual), we at best seldom succeed. If you say 'animal' or 'vegetable' or 'dog' or '*homo sapiens*' you may need to rely on properties with a very open texture. Talk of essences, where we talk of them at all, is often very indeterminate as is talk of connotation. To see philosophy or any cognitive activity as a search for essences is, to put it mildly, very problematic. We have no way to determine for many words, plainly intelligible words, what it would be like to ascertain the alleged essence of what they signify, and never for philosophically significant words. It is impossible to ascertain what property or set of properties are signified in common by all uses of a word and by only that word or its equivalents in all languages. That is, to determine what property or properties are common and distinctive of them. For many of them, indeed for most if not all of them, there is no such thing to be determined or ascertained. Yet 'not', 'and', 'or', 'nor', 'if', 'then' have plain uses as well as, though differently, do 'integrity', 'intriguing', 'boring', and 'untestable'. But none of these words denote and they, as far as we can ascertain, do not signify essences. Indeed, we have no understanding of what it would be like for them to do so. We are up for error, if not for nonsense, if we try to claim either that all meaningful words must stand for something or that all meaningful words must have connotations or even that all meaningful words must have either *or* both connotations and denotations. This is at best false. And attention to our use of language shows it. We feel the force of Wittgenstein, Ryle, and Austin (as different as they are in some respects) here.

Yet, from Plato to Leibnitz to Kant to C. I. Lewis, most philosophers have thought that the very use of language requires, and crucially, essences. Philosophers, they thought, must assume them and with that metaphysics. Something, they believe, we know not what.

II

So I have argued that there is no ideal language floating fully free from ordinary language—some natural language on which any ideal language (some specialized artificial language, logical, philosophical, scientific, literary, legal or a secret code) sometimes in some complex way is dependent. These various ideal languages are all parasitic on—dependent on—some natural language or languages.

With ordinary language, when viewed holistically, we will recognize we have forms of language which are our forms of life. There is no intelligible way of having some non-linguistic human understanding outside of them or independently of them. There is, for *human beings*, no utterly non-linguistic understanding beyond some very primitive initial understandings, if that is what they are, that infants have that enable them to recognize the need for both milk and food, though, of course, they do not and cannot conceptualize them in such a way. These are very primitive understandings, if that is what they are, namely to suck or take in water. That is in some primitive sense to ‘recognize’ the need for milk or water or food or perhaps even for some covering and the like. Infants exhibit such things in their behaviors without yet having speech, even the rudiments of having a language.

Some monkeys—several species—have this ‘understanding’ very much more developed without having a language. They engage in very complicated behavior without having a language. It is behavior that, as I shall illustrate, is very natural to call the social behavior of a cultural being.

There are several species of monkeys that have forms of life but are without a language, unless you want to call purely phatic communication having a language. Phatic communication is a

form of communication but so is grunting, screeching, screaming, howling in pain, or murmurings of pleasure in relaxing, as a cat may purr at being rubbed. But even when a scream or a screech by a guard monkey is used to warn a group of an impending danger, though it communicates, it is not a form of speech even though it is a socialized part of these monkeys' form of life. It is not like a rattlesnake's rattle. Some of the designated monkeys are selected to guard. So there can for monkeys be forms of life that are not forms of language. But that is not so for humans. Thumbing your nose or frowning is not linguistic either, but only becomes so as part of a form of life which is. And this is made so by language-users of a certain form of life.

Some species of monkeys are in certain respects very humanlike. They protect one another, caress one another, kiss one another, fight in ways between distinct groups of monkeys that would be natural to call a war. They have something like bonds between socially determined different groups of the same species of monkeys. These different, socially determined groups (what else could they be since they are of the same species?) bond themselves together apart from the other groups and sometimes antagonistically. These groups sometimes fight each other over territory so it is also natural to call such activities territorial wars over territorial claims and counterclaims. (Do animals, other than human animals, have to speak to make claims? Perhaps if you insist on being very literal. But isn't that a bit pedantic?) The monkeys mentioned also make something that it is again not unnatural to call making peace. (It is also pedantic and arbitrarily so to say they cannot since they cannot sit down around a table and write and sign a peace treaty or talk of matters into an argument, conditional or unconditional. So they can't make peace or resume war.) In doing what I have called 'making peace', they return to their own group care after the cessation of the conflict.

They also with their particular group's social structures have hierarchies with determinate roles for members of their group with their different hierarchies. They have social structures with determinate roles for members of the different hierarchies. They show affection and bereavement, teach their young, and learn reasonably complicated tasks including an adept handling of what it is

natural to call tools such as special rocks for cracking hard nuts. They throw rocks to scare away predators and extract in complicated ways syrup from trees. They show concern for their young and even for their aged. The difference between the human and non-human shrinks.

Such behavior surely looks like having a form of life. When we watch monkeys or chimps so behave we see that in important ways they are very much like us. There is, of course, room and occasion for anthropomorphic projection here, but it is very difficult to believe that it all, or even most of it, is. They lack a language other than phatic noises (even if you want to call it a language) warning of dangers such as intruders, e.g., tigers, crocodiles, members of the same species on the warpath against them.

They have what people who have studied them have appropriately called a community, indeed a culture with a division of labor and established mores. It is natural to speak here of a form of life though unlike human forms of life it is not also a form of language for they have no language. They make certain noises that serve very simple and limited functions: screams if they are burned or struck or sometimes if they want something; noises that are made by monkeys or chimps that are cries of warning or noises of sexual attraction, affection, or irritation. They are very different from human speech but we can see, however indirectly, that they are our ancestors.

For humans, to have a form of life is also and inseparably different from having a form of language. Other animals do not have that. That is distinctive only of the human animal except for infants and some few people utterly deprived of the possibility of language from their beginning or near beginning by something physically inescapable. There can no forms of life that are not forms of language for humans. This is not so for other animals, but the animal kingdom evolves.

Given the behavior of these monkeys and chimps, there is good reason not to say they have no form of life. Indeed, there is good reason to say they do. But the same thing is not true for human beings. If Wittgenstein would deny this, he is being arbitrary. He should say that in *some* ways these animals have forms of life that are in *some* ways similar to ours. It is not the same as a human form

of life, though there is less difference here than many of us in our ignorance have thought. Did the anthropoids, just before they morphed into Cro-Magnons, have a language? Had their grunts and groans come to be so formed of something more than purely phatic communication? Or is there some ambiguity there for the notion of '*purely phatic*' as there is in '*purely emotive*' rendering it cognitively useless? Whether that is the case I don't know, but it is empirical research, if anything, that will determine here what is so. It is not, as *once* under the influence of Sapir-Whorf it was mistakenly thought to be, true about what Wittgenstein would call a private language. I thought mistakenly that it was an empirical issue when it was a logical impossibility.