

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

[W]e are still occupied with the same philosophical problems as were the Greeks.... because our language has remained the same and keeps seducing us into asking the same questions.

—*Culture and Value*, p. 15

THALES TO WITTGENSTEIN

Becoming

The ancient Greeks worked out many of the fundamental concepts of our civilization, including the concept of reality as a single dynamic system. The earliest of them agreed among themselves about the existence of this “system” but differed about how to describe it. While Thales said that the principle of all things is water, his successor Anaximander argued that it could be neither water nor any definite substance. Thales and Anaximander flourished in the early sixth century B.C.; later in the same century, Heraclitus spoke of reality as an “everlasting fire, kindling in measures and going out in measures” (Fragment 30). He, like his predecessors, saw unity amidst change as the essence of things; his distinctive contribution was the idea that change implies a unity of opposites (“The path up and down is one and the same” [Fragment 60]).

Early in the fifth century B.C. Parmenides of Elea challenged the fundamental assumption of “natural philosophers” from Thales to Heraclitus, arguing that reality is changeless and homogeneous (a “well-rounded sphere”), rather than a dynamic unity of opposites. He, like his famous pupil Zeno, regarded “motion” and every other term for change as names devoid of meaning. Why devoid of meaning? Parmenides’ line of thought comes out most clearly in his argument against the sort of change called “coming into being”:

That which can be spoken of and thought needs must be [that is, exist] . . . (Fragment 6, in part)

How can what does not exist come into existence? For if it came into existence, then earlier it was nothingness. And nothingness is unthinkable and unreal. (Fragment 8, in part)

In other words (and with added interpretation):

Whenever we think of something, we must think of it as existing. (To think is to *picture*; to picture something is to picture it as existing.)

If it makes sense to say that something will come into existence, then it makes sense to say that it does not (now) exist.

If it makes sense to say that it does not exist, then it must be possible to think of it as not existing. That is not possible, however, because (to return to the first point) whenever we think of something, we must think of it as existing.

A number of philosophical theories were generated in response to Parmenides' perplexing arguments—notably, the “atomism” of Democritus, the “two worlds theory” of Plato, and the “seeds theory” of Anaxagoras. The last is relatively easy to explain. “Composite things contain the seeds of everything,” according to this fifth-century philosopher. “For how could hair come from what is not hair, or flesh from what is not flesh?”¹ This “solves” the problem of how hair (for example) comes into being by saying that it didn't, really—it was there all along, hidden under other things! To “explain” something (here: coming into being) by explaining it away, as Anaxagoras seems to be doing, is an example of what we now call “reductionism.” (Other examples of reductionism would be Zeno's analysis of the moving arrow into a series of discrete states—as if only what is captured in a set of “still shots” could be real, and [much later] St. Augustine's analysis of time into the threefold “present” of memory, contemplation, and expectation—as if time were a psychological phenomenon. While Zeno reduced the dynamic to the static, Augustine reduced the objective to the psychological.)²

Responding to the provocative arguments of his predecessors, Aristotle appears to have been the first to articulate a thoroughly nonreductive account of change. Looking at what is involved in everyday talk about coming into being, he saw that it presupposes a number of concepts—including not only

1. From Philip Wheelwright, ed., *The Presocratics*, p. 160.

2. Rejection of reductionism in philosophy does not imply rejection of scientific developments such as the reduction of Mendelian to molecular genetics. Zeno-like analyses of motion explain away motion; molecular theory in genetics does not explain away its Mendelian starting point.

opposites, as Heraclitus had emphasized, but also *potentiality*. The air of paradox Parmenides sensed in “What is *not* an oak becomes an oak” (and similar statements) dissipates once we recall that what-is-not-an-oak is an acorn, that is, something potentially, but not yet actually, an oak tree. It is not that the oak comes from what is absolutely nothing, or absolutely non-oak: it comes from what is actually acorn and potentially oak. The reality of an acorn, like the reality (“being”) of other natural things, goes beyond its present actuality. “That which goes beyond present actuality”—potentiality—is no thing (no object, no present actuality), but it is not absolute nothingness (pure non-being) either.

In comparing reality to “a well-rounded sphere” enclosed within itself, Parmenides was (in effect) equating it with “present actuality.” In Parmenidean philosophy:

being = being there
to be = to be complete.

In Aristotelian philosophy (and common speech): “to be” is not only “to be actually such and such” but also “to be potentially so and so”; “to be” is to be in some respects incomplete, as well as in other respects “well rounded.”³

Time and the Mind

Viewed in a philosophical spirit, everyday matters—change, time, knowledge, etc.—are objects of wonder. But when we proceed to reflect on these matters and theorize about them, we are often led into misunderstanding and paradox. And then we need to investigate the everyday, prereflective use of the words in which our reflections are expressed. What tends to block such an investigation is the same as what creates the need for it in the first place: the mind’s fixing on a single, narrow case and making it the model for everything else. As the Presocratic Parmenides fixed on the “present actual-

3. In Aristotelian physics, natural things strive to actualize their potentialities. That may sound like an instance of the mind’s tendency to project itself onto inanimate nature. But Aristotle does not speak, absurdly, of acorns consciously striving to become oaks; he speaks of nature as “unconscious art.” Rather than dismissing this way of speaking as error, it would be better to characterize it as a secondary use of terms that in everyday speech are applied primarily to human and animal activities. This secondary use is Aristotle’s way of expressing a certain perspective on nature as a whole—one not to be dismissed as erroneous just because it is at odds with the view of nature constructed by modern “scientific” philosophers. That it *has* been so dismissed may be an expression of the scientism permeating our civilization. Compare Wittgenstein, CV, pp. 60 j, 37 c.

ity” model of being, so the pre-medieval Augustine, and the early modern Descartes fixed on a similar model of knowing.

What is time? Augustine’s meditations led him to conclude that it is something mysterious and paradoxical. He reasoned that, whatever it is, it must be something measurable. But what is there to measure—given that the past no longer exists, the future is yet to come, and the present (“the now”) is just a point without extension? Wittgenstein suggests that this problem arose from making something like “measuring the length of a stick” the model for all measurement.⁴ The stick is something there in front of us that we can point to and lay a ruler against. Time and its measurement can seem very mysterious when compared with a stick and its measurement.

What is mind? Is there an essential I designated by “I” in “I think”?⁵ Picturing the I as an etherial substance perceptible to me but not others (as Descartes taught modern philosophers to do), throws little light on the actual use of the personal pronoun *I*. But it does generate skeptical problems, notably: “How can I possibly know anything about others’ feelings, or they about mine? I *feel* my pains, so I *know* when I have them. Others, it seems, can only guess.” Wittgenstein suggests that what lies behind this “other minds problem” (as philosophers call it) is fixation on a primitive, “object-designation” model of knowledge: “I can’t point to (designate) your pains; therefore, I can’t possibly know that you have what I do when I say ‘pain.’”⁶

Greek mythology tells of a bandit-innkeeper by the name of *Procrustes*. When guests arrive who do not fit neatly into the uniform iron beds he provides for them, he stretches or prunes them so as to *make* them fit—killing them in the process. A mark of wisdom in philosophy is knowing how to recognize and resist “procrustean” uses of the models and ideals of the theorizing mind.

Logic and Philosophy

Philosophy is the formulation and rational defense of “world views.” It began, in that sense, when Thales and Anaximander depicted the universe as an intrinsically intelligible dynamic system—rather than as the playground of

4. Wittgenstein makes this point in *BB*, p. 26.

5. See *BB*, pp. 66–74. I discuss these important pages in my *Logic and Philosophy*, pp. 127–130.

6. George Berkeley is usually credited with fathering “the other minds problem.” But if Berkeley is its father, Descartes is its grandfather. (See *Meditations* II, particularly the passage near the end where he speaks of looking out his window at passersby and wondering if their hats and clothes might conceal automata.) I would call nearly all characteristically “modern” problems of philosophy *Cartesian*.

capricious forces depicted in Homer and Hesiod. Philosophy is also the investigation of fundamental concepts. It began, in that sense, with Parmenides' scrutiny of key terms in his predecessors' descriptions of the universe, and with Socrates' probing questions about basic moral concepts.

Aristotle was struck by the fact that his predecessors had not merely expressed opinions but also reasoned about them. This moved him to develop a system of techniques for the analysis of reasoning; he is called "the father of logic" because he was the first to develop such a system.

A "pathology of reasoning" or doctrine of fallacies was part of Aristotle's system. Very roughly: there are "formal fallacies," such as illicit conversion, and "informal fallacies," such as equivocation and other *non sequiturs* stemming from linguistic confusion. But some linguistic confusions run deep and call for investigation—"conceptual investigation." Broadly defined, logic is any conceptual investigation.

Logic as conceptual investigation coincides with philosophy as inquiry into fundamental concepts. Parmenides, Zeno, and Socrates initiated logic in that sense; Plato and Aristotle developed it into a high art. In recent times Wittgenstein and others have refined this art and stressed its "grammatical" nature.

Philosophy and Grammar

Does Wittgenstein go too far? Does he reduce "love of wisdom" to a kind of philology, a mere love of words? No. For in asking about the use of the words *mind*, *time*, etc., Wittgenstein is *thereby* asking about the nature of mind, time, etc. If (to use another example) the question is about the nature of the imagination, then we ought to ask not what happens when we imagine, but how the word "imagination" is used.⁷ The question "What happens when we imagine?" misleads us into wanting the description of a process, whereas what we need in philosophy is a grammatical investigation—something to help us recall the circumstances in which we speak of "imagining something." For here, "essence is expressed by grammar" (*PI*, sec. 371).

In the natural sciences, the nature of one's subject is often not expressed by grammar. For example, when a science teacher asks about the nature of gold, she wants to be told not about how the word *gold* is used, but rather about the hidden atomic structure of the stuff called "gold." In philosophy, however, the subject in question will never be a kind of stuff. Never hidden, the essences investigated by philosophy will always be expressed by something already in plain view, namely the "grammar" (as Wittgenstein calls it) of the language we speak.

7. Based on *PI*, sec. 370.

It will be helpful to look a bit further into Wittgenstein's philosophical investigation of time:

Augustine says in the *Confessions* "What, then, is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to someone who has asked, I do not know."—This could not be said about a question of natural science ("What is the specific gravity of hydrogen?" for instance). Something that we know when no one asks us, but no longer know when we are supposed to give an account of it, is something that we need to *remind* ourselves of. (And it is obviously something of which for some reason it is difficult to remind oneself.) (*PI*, sec. 89, translating Augustine's Latin)

Bewitched by the fact that the word *time* is a substantive, we want to be able to designate a corresponding "substance"; unable to do so, we conclude that there is something very mysterious about time. We feel as if we had to penetrate a mysterious phenomenon, and for this reason it seems irrelevant to remind ourselves of something so mundane as the grammar of everyday language. But in fact it is relevant, for it is precisely the lack of a clear view of grammar that generates the deceptive feeling of being in the presence of something mysterious and ethereal.

Wittgenstein would say that disclosing the essence of time calls not for a theory, nor for a definition, but for a "grammatical overview." In the following extended passage, Friedrich Waismann, a one-time collaborator of Wittgenstein's, provides such an overview by recollecting the sorts of things one learned in nursery school:

Imagine a child with a book showing a series of pictures representing the rising, culminating, and setting of the sun. Suppose he learns the words "morning," "midday," "afternoon," etc. in connection with these and related pictures.

Now he learns the game of lifting his hand on the command "Lift your hand when I say 'Now'."

We draw his attention to the changes in a traffic light and prompt him to guess which color will come next. He learns the tenses of a verb in connection with this game. ("The green light was showing," "The amber is showing," "The red will show next.")

Now he learns to tell the time from a clock, and becomes familiar with such expressions as "In five minutes," "At twelve sharp," etc.

Once these preliminary ideas are explained, we can introduce the general word "time."

So Waismann responds to the "What is time?" question not by giving a definition but with a story about how certain "preliminary ideas" might be learned and used. Then he connects these ideas with the word *time* and puts it into

various contexts of use. He thereby reminds us of the word's meaning. Augustine's question was misleading because it made us expect the wrong kind of answer.⁸

Many philosophical problems are questions of the form "What is *x*?" for whose resolution we need to recollect the grammar of "*x*," that is, its use in the language. Prominent "values of *x*" from the history of philosophy include: "being," "change," "number," "color," "time," "mind," "pain," "piety," "soul," "knowledge," "opposition," etc. As there are various kinds of words, so there are various expressions of the grammar of words. These include: tables and diagrams (truth tables, etc.), samples (e.g., color samples), sets of examples (e.g., of various types of number), stories about how the use of a word was taught and learned (as in the Waismann passage), and definitions (e.g., "Opposites can't both be true").

Philosophical investigation recollects the grammar of terms that are deeply embedded in everyday language; it also conducts "a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language." Language bewitches the intelligence by way of its outward form or "surface grammar." For example, the fact that "time" is a noun formation leads us to misconstrue its "depth grammar"—that is, to misunderstand the kind of use it actually has in what we say and do.⁹

Object and Designation

The outward forms of many words call to mind a certain primitive schema: "the model of object and designation."¹⁰ We saw how this schema generates conceptual perplexities when applied to the terms "becoming," "motion," "time," and "pain"—perplexities expressed in the form of questions:

- 1) An apple ripens. How is it possible? How can what is *not red* become *red*?
- 2) Where is the moving arrow? At any given time it is somewhere—and so at rest.
- 3) One cannot measure what is not fully present. So how do we measure the past-present-future of *time*?
- 4) Is what I call "pain" when I hit my thumb with a hammer like what *you* call "pain" when you do the same thing? How could we possibly know?

8. I have pruned and paraphrased the much longer passage in Waismann's *The Principles of Linguistic Philosophy*, pp. 172–174.

9. See *PI*, sec. 664, for the "surface/depth grammar" distinction, and *PI*, sec. 109, for the passage from which the "bewitchment" quote was taken.

10. A phrase from *PI*, sec. 293.

These puzzles have played an important and distinctive part in the Western philosophical tradition. Parmenides and Zeno (“the Eleatics”) are associated with the first and second puzzles; Augustine and modern philosophers with the third and fourth, respectively. The Eleatic puzzles arose from reflection on natural philosophy from Thales to Heraclitus; the Augustinian, from reflection on the biblical world view; the modern, from reflection on the mathematical universe of Galilean-Cartesian physics and on the subject claiming to know it. As Aristotle demonstrated a nonreductive way of resolving paradoxes in ancient thought, so Wittgenstein demonstrates a nonreductive way of resolving analogous paradoxes in medieval and modern thought.