

Class #1 - Motivating the Revolution

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I. Introduction to the Course

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II. Plato's *Sophist*, Language, and Truth

We will start with Plato.

Throughout his work, Plato is concerned to distinguish philosophy, as a quest for truth, from the work of the sophists, who sought merely to win arguments.

Plato's task, in [Sophist](#), is to refute an argument that one can not lie.

- NL NL1. Lying is saying what is not.
- NL2. That which is not has no sort of being.
- NL3. When I say something, it has at least some sort of being.
- NLC. So, lying is impossible.

The suspect argument NL depends on Parmenides' claim, NL2.

The argument for NL2 seems to be that 'that' attributes singularity, which is some sort of being.

If NL were sound, the sophist could deny that he is a liar, a maker only of semblances, rather than likenesses.

Most of the dialogue in *Sophist* is between the young Theaetetus, who plays the interlocutor role, and an Eleatic Stranger, who takes Socrates' normal role.

We can only speculate as to why Plato did not have Socrates in his usual position in this dialogue.

One speculation is that the dialogue begins with a presumption that Parmenides' claim must be false.

Plato might not have wanted to put such a presumption in the normally open-minded Socrates' mouth.

Also, Plato seemed to hold the older Parmenides in great esteem.

Since Plato was denying Parmenides' claim, he might have wanted to keep that argument away from his key mouthpiece.

There are two key parts in our selection.

First, Plato dissects the nature of an assertion into noun and verb.

Stranger: [T]here are two sorts of intimation of being which are given by the voice.

Theaetetus: What are they?

Stranger: One of them is called nouns, and the other verbs.

Theaetetus: Describe them.

Stranger: That which denotes action we call a verb.

Theaetetus: True.

Stranger: And the other, which is an articulate mark set on those who do the actions, we call a noun.

Theaetetus: Quite true.

Stranger: A succession of nouns only is not a sentence any more than of verbs without nouns...I mean that words like "walks," "runs," "sleeps," or any other words which denote action, however many of them you string together, do not make discourse.

Theaetetus: How can they?

Stranger: Or, again, when you say "lion," "stag," "horse," or any other words which denote agents. Neither in this way of stringing words together do you attain to discourse, for there is no expression of action or inaction, or of the existence of existence or non-existence indicated by the sounds, until verbs are mingled with nouns. Then the words fit, and the smallest combination of them forms language, and is the simplest and least form of discourse (*Sophist* 2-3).

Plato shows that falsity ('Theaetetus flies') results from combining a noun and a verb which do not go together in reality.

Thus, the sophist is refuted.

NLI is shown false because lying is not merely saying what is not.

At least some form of lying is saying of what is some quality that it does not have.

That which is not (e.g. 'theaetetus flies') thus may have has some sort of being.

It can be a false attribution of a property to a real object, e.g. Theaetetus.

The second, and related, interesting part of the selection is the notion of truth as correspondence to reality.

Stranger: We agreed that every sentence must necessarily have a certain quality.

Theaetetus: Yes.

Stranger: And what is the quality of each of these two sentences?

Theaetetus: The one, as I imagine, is false, and the other true.

Stranger: The true says what is true about you?

Theaetetus: Yes.

Stranger: And the false says what is other than true?

Theaetetus: Yes.

Stranger: And therefore speaks of things which are not as if they were?

Theaetetus: True (*Sophist* 4).

*Sophist* is the earliest instance in western philosophy where truth is seen as a property of propositions, of a correspondence between language and the world.

Thus, the philosopher, Plato notices, has an inevitable focus on language if she is to pursue truth.

He has Socrates say as much elsewhere.

When I had wearied of investigating things, I thought that I must be careful to avoid the experience of those who watch an eclipse of the sun, for some of them ruin their eyes unless they watch its reflection in water or some such material. A similar thought crossed my mind, and I feared that my soul would be altogether blinded if I looked at things with my eyes and tried to grasp them with each of my senses. So I thought I must take refuge in discussions and investigate the truth of things by means of words (*Phaedo* 99e).

It is traditional to ascribe the correspondence theory of truth to Aristotle.

To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is,

and of what is not that it is not, is true (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1011b25).

One worry about the correspondence theory is that we do not seem to have any extra-linguistic way to apprehend reality.

If I want to compare, say, an elephant to a picture of an elephant, or a picture of a sculpture of an elephant to a picture of an elephant, I can hold both of them in front of me, gazing from the one to the other.



If I want to compare my words to the world, I have to apprehend, on the one side, what the words mean, and on the other, the world.

But, it has seemed to some philosophers, I only apprehend the world mediately, through my ideas of it. I do not have any access to the world as it is in itself.

It seems as if I am unable to compare my words, or my ideas, to an independent world, to decide whether there really is a correspondence between them.

The correspondence theory says that truth is a matching of words to the world, but I can only really know about one side of the equation.

The correspondence theory of truth is not the only theory of truth.

Some philosophers have adopted coherence theories.

According to coherentism, the truth of a sentence consists in its consistency with other beliefs we hold. Different people apprehend the world in different ways, depending on their experiences, expectations, and background beliefs.

The coherentist despairs of any method of resolving these inconsistencies among people and their beliefs. Imagine that I believe in a traditional, monotheistic God and that you do not.

1 will be true for me, since it coheres with my other beliefs.

1        God is omniscient.

In contrast, 1 will be false for you, since it conflicts with your other beliefs.

Since different people hold different beliefs, the coherence-truth of a sentence depends on the person who is considering the sentence.

Coherence theories thus collapse into relativism.

Where correspondence truth is an absolutist, or objective, theory, coherence truth is relativist.

Relativism about truth traces back at least as far as Protagoras, who claimed that man is the measure of all things.

The correspondence and coherence theories of truth each provide a univocal analysis of 'truth'. Insofar as they entail that there is a property called truth, they are both inflationary theories of truth. Inflationary theories are distinguished from deflationary theories of truth. Deflationary theories of truth were developed in the last century, and are often called minimalist theories. Deflationary theories have many proponents, all of whom have different ways of understanding and explaining deflationism. Deflationists are united in the belief that there is no essence to truth, no single reduction of truth to a specific property, like correspondence or consistency. Briefly, the deflationists say that there is no essence to truth, that there is no one theory of truth. Deflationists were originally called disquotationalists because they think that the meaning of 'true' is exhausted by its use in sentences of the form of 2.

2       'Snow is white' is true iff snow is white.

In all cases, pursuit of truth in some way turns to language.

### III. Language and the Moderns

Some questions can be answered by appealing to language. For example, the meaning of an obscure term can be given to explain a claim that we do not understand.

"You seem very clever at explaining words, Sir," said Alice. "Would you kindly tell me the meaning of the poem called 'Jabberwocky'?"

"Let's hear it," said Humpty Dumpty. "I can explain all the poems that were ever invented - and a good many that haven't been invented just yet."

This sounded very hopeful, so Alice repeated the first verse:

*Tw'as brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

"That's enough to begin with," Humpty Dumpty interrupted: "there are plenty of hard words there. '*Brillig*' means four o'clock in the afternoon - the time when you begin broiling things for dinner."

"That'll do very well," said Alice: and '*slithy*'?"

"Well, '*slithy*' means 'lithe and slimy.' 'Lithe' is the same as 'active.' You see it's like a portmanteau - there are two meanings packed up into one word."

"I see it now," Alice remarked thoughtfully: "and what are '*toves*'?"

"Well, '*toves*' are something like badgers - they're something like lizards - and they're something like corkscrews."

"They must be very curious looking creatures."

"They are that," said Humpty Dumpty: "also they make their nests under sun-dials - also they live on cheese."

"And what's to '*gyre*' and to '*gimble*'?"

"To '*gyre*' is to go round and round like a gyroscope. To '*gimble*' is to make holes like a gimblet."

“And ‘*the wabe*’ is the grass-plot round a sun-dial, I suppose?” said Alice, surprised at her own ingenuity.

“Of course it is. It’s called ‘*wabe*,’ you know, because it goes a long way before it, and a long way behind it --” (Carroll, [\*Through the Looking Glass\*](#), p 4).

It’s not clear that many philosophical questions can be answered in this way, though, by merely appealing to definitions of terms.

As we will see, the debate among defenders of the ontological argument and its detractors proceeds from the agreement that the term ‘God’ is used in an attempt to refer to a being with all perfections.

Defenders and detractors agree on the meaning of the term.

The question remains whether the argument proves the existence of God.

In addition to explicating meanings, a focus on language can assist us in precision, as when Alice and Humpty Dumpty discuss her age.

“So here’s a question for you. How old did you say you were?”

Alice made a short calculation, and said “Seven years and six months.”

“Wrong!” Humpty Dumpty exclaimed triumphantly. “You never said a word like it!”

“I though you meant ‘How old *are* you?’” Alice explained.

“If I’d meant that, I’d have said it,” said Humpty Dumpty.

Alice didn’t want to begin another argument, so she said nothing (Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, p 2).

Humpty Dumpty, like any typical philosopher, demands precision.

“The piece I’m going to repeat,” he went on without noticing her remark, “was written entirely for your amusement.”

Alice felt that in that case she really *ought* to listen to it, so she sat down, and said “Thank you” rather sadly.

*“In winter, when the fields are white,*

*I sing this song for your delight -*

only I don’t sing it,” he added, as an explanation.

“I see you don’t,” said Alice.

“If you can *see* whether I’m singing or not, you’ve sharper eyes than most.” Humpty Dumpty remarked severely. Alice was silent (Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, p 5).

These Carroll examples are mainly silliness, designed for amusement.

But one can not really deny that precision is useful.

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus tells the Cyclops that he is nobody.

The Cyclops takes ‘Nobody’ for a proper name.

One might think that the Cyclops would have benefitted from a more-precise understanding of language, and how Odysseus was using it.

Frege’s mathematical logic revolutionized philosophy precisely because of its unprecedented precision.

Still, the question remains whether there are philosophical questions that can be resolved by focusing on language.

Hume believes so.

He claims that certain philosophical terms are meaningless and should be stricken from the language.

Words whose meanings can be explained in terms of our sense experience (which he calls matters of fact) or our most basic logic or mathematics (which he calls relations of ideas) are acceptable.

But, other philosophical terms have no legitimate use.

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume--of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance--let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion (Hume *Inquiry*).

The logical positivists made a similar claim, as we will see.

Berkeley's [introduction to the \*Principles\*](#) makes a claim similar to Hume's, that some philosophical problems are just the result of bad uses of language.

In particular, Berkeley blames Locke for appealing to a doctrine of abstract ideas.

How ready soever I may be to acknowledge the scantiness of my comprehension with regard to the endless variety of spirits and ideas that may possibly exist, yet for any one to pretend to a notion of entity or existence, abstracted from spirit and idea, from perceived and being perceived, is, I suspect, a downright repugnancy and trifling with words (Berkeley, *Principles* §81).

Berkeley's objection to Locke is that his uses of general terms like 'matter' and 'man' and 'two' are illegitimate, since we have no ideas to correspond to such terms.

Locke's view of language set the standard among the moderns.

Before Locke, the most common view about language, when people thought of it at all, was that words stood for objects in the world.

Wittgenstein ascribes this view to Augustine.

When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shewn by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires (Augustine, cited in Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §1)

Jonathan Swift, in [Gulliver's Travels](#), satirizes this view.

If words just serve as signs of objects, we could achieve the same purposes of language without words at all.

We could just show the objects for which our words stand.

Locke established the modern's view of language by arguing that words stand for ideas, not for objects.

[It is] perverting the use of words, and bring[ing] unavoidable obscurity and confusion into their signification, whenever we make them stand for anything but those ideas we have in our own

minds (Locke, [Essay §III.2.5](#)).

Locke's argument that words stand for ideas rests on our use of language for communication.

- LL LL1. Society depends on our ability to communicate our ideas, so words must be able to stand for ideas.
- LL2. Since my ideas precede my communication, words must refer to my ideas before they could refer to anything else.
- LL3. If words refer both to my ideas and to something else (e.g. your idea, or an external object), then they would be ambiguous.
- LL4. But, words are not ordinarily ambiguous.
- LL5. So, words ordinarily do not stand for something other than my ideas.
- LLC. So, words stand for my ideas.

While names refer to our own ideas, we just suppose them to refer to other people's ideas, or for external objects.

A child having taken notice of nothing in the metal he hears called gold, but the bright shining yellow colour, he applies the word gold only to his own idea of that colour, and nothing else; and therefore calls the same colour in a peacock's tail gold. Another that hath better observed, adds to shining yellow great weight: and then the sound gold, when he uses it, stands for a complex idea of a shining yellow and a very weighty substance. Another adds to those qualities fusibility: and then the word gold signifies to him a body, bright, yellow, fusible, and very heavy. Another adds malleability. Each of these uses equally the word gold, when they have occasion to express the idea which they have applied it to: but it is evident that each can apply it only to his own idea; nor can he make it stand as a sign of such a complex idea as he has not...(Locke, *Essay* §III.2.3).

Concomitant with his claim that words stand for ideas, Locke claims that general terms stand for abstract ideas.

A particular term, like a name, stands for one specific object.

A general term, in contrast, can stand for more than one thing.

'Apple' can be used for any of various apples.

'Green', 'motion', and 'body' are similarly general terms.

For Locke, they stand not for a particular idea or specific sensation, but for abstract, general ideas.

There are too many particular things for them all to have particular names.

So we have to use general terms.

1. Human capacity is limited (III.3.2).
2. You don't have names for my ideas and I don't have names for yours (III.3.3).
3. Science depends on generality (III.3.4).

Thus, we use both particular names, for particular ideas when it is useful.

And we use general terms for communication and for science.

Berkeley's claim that Locke's view trifles with words, like Hume's counsel to commit speculative metaphysics to the flames, is largely aimed at Locke's philosophy of language and his doctrine of abstract ideas.

But all of the moderns, including Berkeley and Hume, held what might be called the representational theory of ideas.

The central tenets of the representational theory of ideas are that words stand for internal thoughts and that thoughts are representations of an external reality.

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the theory of ideas reached its end with the work of Kant, and his distinction between the noumenal world and the phenomenal world.

Kant saw that the representational theory of ideas blocks any possibility of knowledge.

If we know any claim, it must be true.

We can believe falsehoods, but we can not know a falsehood.

Remember that truth is supposed to be a connection between words and the world.

If words stand for my ideas, I can never make the connection to the world that truth requires.

We have only our ideas of the world to compare with our language.

The early nineteenth century in philosophy is mostly a wasteland of philosophers trying to come to grips with Kant's insights, and slowly learning to see, and then abandon, the theory of ideas.

The language revolution to which the title of this course refers begins quietly in 1879 with the publication of Gottlob Frege's *Begriffsschrift*, the first comprehensive theory of formal mathematical logic.

(Today's symbolic logic is a mere notational variant of Frege's system.)

Frege builds his view in the *Grundlagen*, or *Foundations of Arithmetic*, in which he attacks Locke's psychologism and defends a claim, now known as the context principle, which says that the meaning of a word depends on its use in a sentence.

If the context principle is correct, Augustine and Locke and the moderns were all doomed to failure because they thought that the basic unit of language is the word.

Frege saw that the basic unit of language is the proposition.

We'll get to Frege's work soon.

First, we should talk about propositions and some other terms we will use in this course.

#### IV. Some Useful Terms

*Inscription*: a written token of a term, or word.

*Utterance*: a spoken token of a term.

*Sentence*: An inscription or utterance used for a speech act. We will mostly be concerned with sentences that can be true or false, declarative sentences, but questions and commands and exclamations are also sentences. One can utter a sentence, or write it down. I indicate sentences with scare-quotes: 'The tree outside my window is barren'. I might also just display it, and give it a name:

1        The all-time home-run leader is a steroid freak.

I have named this sentence '1'.

*Sentence type*: An abstract object which can be instantiated by either an utterance or an inscription, or maybe even an idea. In 2 and 3, we see two sentence tokens, but only one sentence type.



- 2      Maisy is a mouse.
- 3      Maisy is a mouse.

*Proposition:* The meaning of a sentence, an abstract object. Propositions are often expressed as that-clauses. So, 1 means that the all-time home-run leader is a steroid freak, and 2 means that Maisy is a mouse. Propositions, unlike sentence types, are language independent.

- 4      Maisy es una ratón.

4 is a different sentence (token and type) from 2, but expresses the same proposition. Frege calls propositions thoughts.

*Assertion, or statement:* A declarative sentence, used to say something that can be either true or false. We use sentences to make assertions, by expressing propositions.

*Expression:* Usually used to refer to a sub-sentential phrase, either a subject term or a predicate term.

*Concept:* An abstract object corresponding to sub-sentential-sized linguistic objects. Different people each have their own ideas, but may share concepts. Some concepts refer to or stand for objects. The inscription ‘Guernica’ is an instance of the title (a term) of Picasso’s painting. When we see that inscription, we may have an idea of the painting in our minds. Your idea and mine may match, in which case we share a concept. That concept corresponds (or not), in some way, to the actual painting.

*Subject-predicate form:* Many of the above terms refer to sentence-sized objects. Declarative sentences (and their corresponding propositions, etc.) can be parsed into subject-predicate form. Predicates (which, like sentences, can be tokens or types) express, or stand for, properties, which are abstract objects. Properties are sometimes called attributes.

Sentence	Subject	Predicate
1	the all-time home-run leader	x is a steroid freak
2	Maisy	x is a mouse
Whales are mammals	whales	xs are mammals
Mark went to the movie with Stephanie	Mark	x went to the movie with Stephanie
Mark went to the movie with Stephanie	Mark, Stephanie	x went to the movie with y

Notice that we can parse ‘Mark went to the movie with Stephanie’ either as having a single subject, and a more specific predicate, or as having two subjects, and a more general, relational predicate.

*Name:* A term which picks out a particular object (e.g. ‘Maisy’). Most names apply to more than one object, but we imagine that they do not, because we can disambiguate by the context of their use.

*Definite description:* An expression, usually beginning with ‘the’, which, like a name, picks out a

particular object (e.g. 'the all-time home-run leader'). Russell calls them 'denoting phrases'.

*Singular term*: Expressions referring to a specific thing. Names and definite descriptions are singular terms. We might interpret 'whales' as a singular term, referring to the one set of all whales. But, it is more natural to think of it as referring to many (all) whales.

*Use and Mention*: There is a difference between using a term and mentioning it. Ordinary instances of language are uses. When we talk about the terms of our language, we sometimes mention them.

"[T]here are three hundred and sixty-four days when you might get un-birthday presents -"

"Certainly," said Alice.

"And only *one* for birthday presents, you know. There's glory for you!"

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't - till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,'" Alice objected.

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less" (Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* 3)

When Alice says that she does not know what Humpty Dumpty means, she mentions the term. She puts scare quotes around it to indicate that she is using it, rather than mentioning it.

C1     The cat is on the mat.

C2     'Cat' has three letters.

In C1, 'cat' is used.

In C2, 'cat' is mentioned.