

Philosophy 408: The Language Revolution
Spring 2009
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:30pm - 3:45pm

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Class 1 - Motivating the Revolution

I. Hand out Syllabi and discuss assignments:

- Article precisés
- Seminar papers/presentations (sign up on Thursday)
- Term Paper (course bibliography)
- Final Exam

We'll start in earnest, next week, with Frege, because everyone and everything in the twentieth century starts with Frege.

There are certain figures in the history of philosophy through which everything travels: Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas (maybe), Descartes, Kant, Frege.

I think Quine will be another figure like that, but it will take a bit of time to see whether this is the case. We'll dither through a bit of history as an introduction.

I'm going to discuss a lot of material in this introduction, mainly as a way of introducing topics to which we will return in depth.

So, don't worry if it seems as if we are moving too fast through things, right now.

We are just whetting our appetites.

II. Plato's *Sophist*

Since we're dithering, let's start with Plato.

Throughout his work, Plato is concerned to distinguish his work, 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.

Here's the suspect argument:

1. Lying is saying what is not.
 2. That which is not has no sort of being.
 3. When I say something, it has at least some sort of being.
- So, lying is impossible.

The suspect argument depends on Parmenides' claim, premise 2.

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

If the suspect argument is sound, the sophist can 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.

Though, one could read the dialogue *Parmenides* as a kind of satire, though that's a non-standard reading.

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 the selection from *Sophist*.

First, in the early part (pp 2-4) Plato dissects the nature of an assertion into noun and verb.

Then, he 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.

Lying is not saying what is not.

Lying (at least some form of it) is saying of what is some quality that it does not have.

Or, that which is not (e.g. 'theaetetus flies') has some sort of being (i.e. it is about a real Theaetetus).

The second, and related, interesting part of the selection (p 4) is the notion of truth as correspondence to reality.

Sophist is the first place in the history of 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.

Socrates says as much in the *Phaedo*, 99e (handout).

In *Phaedo*, Socrates, recounting his life, describes his turn away from the natural science of his day towards language in order to understand reality.

If the philosopher is after truth, then he has to make a words-worlds connection.

III. Truth and language

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

One could be a relativist, like Protagoras (man is the measure of all things).

Others present a coherence theory of truth, on which a statement is true if it is consistent with other principles.

We will look a bit at another theory of truth, the deflationary theory, when we discuss Tarski.

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 following form:

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

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

It is true that some questions can be answered by appealing to language.

Consider Humpty Dumpty explaining *Jabberwocky*, p 4.

(Portmanteaus: edress, webisode, blog).

Focusing on language can assist us in precision, as on p 2, where Alice and Humpty Dumpty discuss her age.

And, whether one can see whether one is singing, p 5.

These Carroll examples are mainly silliness, designed for amusement.

Are there philosophical questions that can be resolved by focusing on language.

Consider the case in Martinich of 'nothing came down the road', p 1.

Hume has a stronger claim about the power of examining language (handout). His claim is that certain terms are just meaningless, and should be stricken from the language. The positivists had a similar claim, and we will look briefly at Ayer and Carnap's work on meanings during the term.

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. That introduction is one of the finest essays in the history of philosophy, and I have excerpted just a few sections.

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

Note that Berkeley is looking at the correspondence of language to our ideas, rather than the correspondence of language to the world.

Berkeley, Locke, and most of the moderns, held what we might call the representational theory of ideas. Plato hints at the theory of ideas in the *Sophist*, p 6, though it is not his theory.

The theory of language that emerges from the moderns is related to their representational theory of ideas. The central tenets are that words stand for internal thoughts that (for anyone except Berkeley) are representations of an external reality.

We will look briefly at Locke's presentation of this view, next week, and we will look in detail at Wittgenstein's rejection of the theory, his private language argument, later in the term.

By the end of the 18th 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 words-worlds connection was impossible to make, in the context of the representational theory of ideas.

Truth is supposed to be a correspondence between language and reality, but the noumenal world, the real world, is inaccessible to us.

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

The 19th century in philosophy is 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.

Hegel's idealism, and his coherence theory of truth, is, I believe, an example of the nineteenth century's turn inwards, away from the external world.

Frege's *Grundlagen* (handout) is a turn away from the idealisms of Kant and Hegel, and back toward objective truth.