

On there being philosophical knowledge

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I

Philosophers make claims about the structure of reality, about human nature, about how human beings should live, about what a well-ordered society should look like, about what the mind is and what mental representations are and the like. A systematic philosophy, if we could ever really have such a thing, would yield a better understanding of our fundamental concepts: existence, knowledge, identity, truth and value. In doing this philosophers would elucidate those concepts and, as well, concepts such as space, time, causality, person, mind, morality, the state and the like. Existence, identity, knowledge, truth and value are the central governing concepts, or organizing notions, of any system of thought and action. We could hardly be or act in the world without them. Moreover, they are concepts which in their essence are ahistorical. They are, in partial explanation of this, as vital to a Stone Age person as to a modern Londoner. Our lives, no matter who we are, are necessarily organized around such concepts. No matter how historicist we are we need to realize that philosophy (at least as traditionally conceived) endeavors to give us a more adequate understanding of them and their interrelations. Moreover, it does not enfreignents attempts to show that these concepts are not just concepts of a particular time or place or set of times and places.

Our concepts, of course, are embedded in language. We have no independent access to them apart from language. But at least some of our concepts, such as plainly the first set of concepts mentioned above (mentioned, of course, in a particular language), are, that notwithstanding, language-neutral. The same concepts are expressed by different inter-translatable expressions in different languages. The philosopher's remarks about "knowing," "cause,"

“truth,” though they are expressed in a given natural language, are not language-parochial. She, if she writes in English, describes the uses of such terms as “cause,” “truth,” “good,” “time” in English and seeks, where there is some philosophical perplexity about them, to give them a perspicuous representation. But her subject matter is not the English language but the *uses* of certain English terms, uses which are identical to the uses of certain French or German terms.¹ The philosopher’s interest is in use, the non-Platonic stand-in for meaning. These terms in their use are the linguistic vehicles for the concepts they express.

Perhaps, if she is a bit of a systematic philosopher, she will also seek, in giving this a perspicuous representation, to display clearly the connections and interrelations between them.² The aim here is to give us a picture of a broad conceptual terrain. The aim is a linguistic variant of the ancient philosophical one of trying to see how things hang together as a whole. But this, the claim goes, is best done by getting a clear command of our great organizing concepts and their connections and interrelations.

II

This conception of philosophy is a powerful one and perhaps a compelling one. Let us linguisticize it a bit and then begin to raise questions about it. Let me start from some remarks of Zeno Vendler’s.³ He maintains that linguistics is not philosophy but, that notwithstanding, language and its study has a peculiar, intimate and

¹ Gilbert Ryle: *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinsons University Library, 1949); *Collected Essays*, Volume I (London: Hutchinson, 1971), 236–248; and *Collected Essays*, Volume II (London: Hutchinson, 1971), 194–225, 287–293, 301–325, 407–414.

² Stuart Hampshire, “Identification and Existence” in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, H. D. Lewis, ed. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1956), 191–208 and his “A Statement about Philosophy” in *The Owl of Minerva*, Charles Bontempo and S. Jack Odell, eds. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 89–101.

³ Zeno Vendler, “Philosophy of Language and Linguistic Philosophy” in *Sprachphilosophie*, M. Dascal et. al., eds. (Amsterdam: De Gruyter, 1988). All references to Vendler are given in the text.

fundamental relation to philosophy. For a philosopher, he claims, “language is not just a means of expression, but to a large extent a source of insight as well. He does not merely argue in language, but from language (actual or contrived) in a unique and characteristic way.” (1) This way of doing things is rooted in the practice of much earlier philosophy and has become pervasive and explicit with contemporary philosophy since much of it took a linguistic turn.

In trying to account for this Vendler talks of the role of the imagination in philosophy. As Vendler puts it, “whereas the scientist in his experiment creates actual situations and then observes what happens, the philosopher projects imagined situations and then notes what we would say.” (1) Some ways of speaking, some ways of conceptualizing, the philosopher claims, just must be that way; there just is no intelligible alternative to such ways of speaking. And the way of things here, Vendler claims, must be the way of concepts. While the “scientist wants to know more about stuff; the philosopher wants to know more about concepts. And concepts do not float freely in the air; they manifest themselves in language, in what they say.” (1–2)

In that way *pace* Quine philosophy cannot, Vendler maintains, be continuous with science. Here the philosopher is not like a descriptive linguist just describing, listing and categorizing what people in fact say; rather the philosopher tries to tease insight out of what we would say in certain situations, situations “designed to stress the tolerance of concepts to the limit.”⁴ (2) It is because of this that philosophers discuss such weird, Vendler calls them surrealistic, examples such as brains in vats, split brains, brains with remote computer attachments, the soul of the prince going into the body of the cobbler, the world being created five minutes ago replete with false memories of it, the world coming out of the belly of a spider, counterearths, an infinity of possible worlds containing an inexhaustible supply of *Doppelgangers* for us all, people turning to stone

⁴ This is not to deny linguistics could do exactly the same thing. Indeed part of the burden of my argument shall be that any establishment of these claims about what we would say rests with linguistics as an empirical study of language. There is no “way of intuition” or a high *a priori* road here.

while having frightful pains, lions talking and the like. These are the standard repertoire of philosophical examples.

Philosophical discussion is typically such that if people ignorant of philosophy were to overhear a typical stretch of philosophical conversation they would conclude the conversationalists, while nimble witted, were utterly mad. The method in this madness is just what Vendler says it is, namely to put questions to the use of our words in order to discover the contours of our concepts by unearthing and trying our linguistic competence. In doing this the philosopher must rely heavily on the linguistic intuitions (principally the semantic intuitions) of competent speakers, typically native speakers. Scientists and politicians and typically just plain folk standardly talk about the world. Philosophers, by contrast, engaging in second-order talk, talk about that talk about the world or more accurately about the uses (style of functioning) of the talk about the world.⁵

However, as Vendler is well aware, this, particularly from traditionalists but also from some scientistically oriented philosophers and other theoreticians, gives rise to the following objection. Philosophy, at least its center, if it is to come to anything, must be First Philosophy. It must coherently be able to talk about ultimate reality (whatever that is) or the underlying structure of the world or at least a part of it such as social reality. It, that is, wants to talk about reality, not just about talk about reality where in the latter we must at key points rely on our *linguistic intuitions*: what we competent speakers would say when we are putting our language to the test most particularly in bizarre though not only in bizarre situations. Even, the objection continues, if the philosopher can get it right about our concepts—something so far she has not been very good at—she may still be all wrong about reality. Her results merely describe how we *commonly think* about such things as space, time and causation, about human beings, their minds, and their actions and so forth. This does not mean, however, that we are *right* in our thinking. It (and here the traditionalist and the scientistically oriented philosopher part company) is up to the scientist to find out how

⁵ Gilbert Ryle, *Collected Papers*, Volume II, 407–414.

these things really are; "it is he, and not the philosopher, who has the right answers, or at least the first right to answer." This is a core challenge of the scientistically oriented philosopher (say someone like Paul Churchland) to linguistic philosophy.⁶ The traditionalist will share the negative evaluation of linguistic philosophy but will not, of course, accept its scientistic replacement.

Philosophers have not wanted to be some peculiar kind of do-it-yourself anthropologist or sociologist or sociologist of language or linguist talking about our talk about the world. Philosophy in its glory days as First Philosophy wanted to talk, and in a distinctive way that went beyond anything scientifically establishable, about the ultimate reality underlying the appearances with which science and common sense concern themselves.⁷ First Philosophy wanted to talk of that reality or at least it wanted to speak of those fundamental aspects of reality presupposed in all science and common sense but whose fundamental nature neither science nor common sense could properly understand without the aid of philosophy, where what philosophy is is itself adequately understood and resolutely pursued. Only philosophy, it was claimed in the glory days, can tell us what the underlying structure of reality is. The hope was not to discover just what people *commonly think* about causation or to discover how native speakers use "cause" but *what causation really is*. Traditionalists—orthodox believers in First Philosophy—

⁶ Paul Churchland: *Scientific Realism and the Plasticity of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and "Reduction, Qualia and Direct Introspection of Brain States," *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985), 8–28.

⁷ For a sensitive restatement of that conception which is thoroughly cognizant of the challenge of linguistic philosophy see F. C. Copleston, "Philosophical Knowledge" in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, Third Series, H. D. Lewis, ed. and his "Philosophy as I See It" in *The Owl of Minerva*, 153–159. See also Brand Blanshard, "The Philosophic Enterprise," *The Owl of Minerva*, 163–177 and C. D. Broad, "Philosophy I and II," *Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1958), 99–129 and his "Critical and Speculative Philosophy" in *British Philosophy*, First Series, J. H. Muirhead, ed. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1924), 77–100. For variants on that theme from a rather different perspective see J. J. C. Smart, "My Semantic Ascents and Descents" in *The Owl of Minerva*, 57–72. Defenders of First Philosophy need not be as naive as Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom.

think that philosophy alone can tell us what causation, truth, existence, or goodness really are. Defenders of scientific conceptions of philosophy think that if we can find out anything about these things at all science will tell us what it is for what science cannot tell us humankind cannot know. Philosophy, such scientific chaps believe, if it is to come to anything, must transform itself into some kind of empirical science. Talking about the uses of words in the amateurish way that linguistic philosophers do is little more than a form of pop linguistics. What we want from philosophers, both the traditionalists and scientific philosophers say, is for them to talk about reality (say about causation) and not just about the talk about reality, e.g. about the use of “cause.”

The trouble, the objection continues, is not only that philosophers might be right about our concepts and wrong about reality, it is also the case, some scientific theoreticians will say, that many of even our central organizing concepts, including cause, belief and thought, by mean of which we commonly think about the world, are loaded with the burden of outdated science and past superstition. Cause and belief, the claim goes, are like God and the soul—outmoded concepts that the progress of science and the dissemination of its results should teach us to discard to be replaced by more scientifically acceptable concepts. But this, if well-taken, puts a crimp in our conception of philosophy as a second-order task devoted to clarifying and perspicuously representing our fundamental organizing concepts. Vendler puts this type of objection very well when he remarks that such “notions as causality, belief, and choice may join witches and devils, caloric and vital force, on the trash heap of discarded ideas. Thus the philosophers’ efforts to clarify or define are but attempts to groom a dead horse.” (3)

III

Vendler seeks to defend linguistic philosophy from such attacks and, as well, to provide a linguistic variant of the conception with which I started of philosophy as clarifying and perspicuously displaying our fundamental organizing concepts.

In articulating his twin defence, namely his defense of philosophy as the analysis of concepts and his rebuttal of the scientific (and in

effect) traditionalist challenge, Vendler starts with (a) a characterization of how philosophers—or at least many philosophers—actually proceed, (b) an explanation of why they proceed in this way, and (c) a justification of their so proceeding.

Starting simply with a description of practice, Vendler notes that philosophers do not have laboratories and they do not make carefully controlled observations. Philosophy is an armchair activity done either in a solitary manner or in discussion, not infrequently intense, with other philosophers. Yet philosophers do make claims about language and thought, language and reality, about what causation is or knowledge or truth or about reality *tout court* (whatever that is). And most philosophers will claim that their findings are true and give reasons for believing them to be true. They are not—skeptical naysayers aside—in doubt about there being philosophical knowledge.

There indeed have been philosophers, particularly in the twentieth century, with what Vendler describes as a suicidal bent, who have tried to provide grounds for rejecting that philosophical activity. Vendler points to logical positivism, Wittgenstein and most recently Rorty. Hume and Pascal did something like this earlier. But, Vendler comments laconically, as the history of the subject testifies, philosophy survives. Vendler does not expect or desire a demise of The Tradition. He only hopes for its reform into a distinctive, self-conscious, linguistic turn. Philosophers go on making claims about God and the soul, space, time and cause, knowledge and belief, thought and action, good and evil and rights and obligations. Their claims are supported by arguments “which, in turn, are heatedly countered with other arguments by their peers.” (5) But these arguments are distinctive in that they are not backed up by observation or experiment. (They are also distinctive, though Vendler does not note this, in that there is no consensus concerning which arguments are on the mark.)⁸

⁸ Two very traditional philosophers have powerfully argued that. See Henry Sidgwick, *Philosophy: Its Scope and Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1902) and C. D. Broad, “Philosophy I and II” and his “Critical and Speculative Philosophy.” Different lessons are drawn from this by Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 211–230 and by Kai

What then is the *modus operandi* of the philosopher? Recall my earlier remark about the philosopher's use of imagination and the probing of our linguistic competence by the use of weird examples to try to determine what we competent users of the language in question would say in the circumstance in question. These flights of surrealist imagination are designed to show the use of our terms at the limits of their application: terms which are the mode of expression of concepts to which our inescapable linguacentric predicament gives us no other access. The physicist exposes matter to extremes of pressure, temperature and to fields of force. The philosopher exposes the concept of knowledge to the extremes of weird counter-examples of what we should say when (e.g. Gettier counter-examples) to test the use of a linguistic vehicle for the concept of knowledge. As the physicist questions nature so the philosopher questions our concepts: puts them under stress. They both proceed by subjecting their subject matter to the pressure of extreme circumstances. The philosopher, to call attention to his distinctive methodology,

cannot be satisfied with merely observing and registering what people say in the ordinary course of daily life, if he wants to arrive at a deeper understanding of our basic concepts. He has to force the issues by "putting those concepts to the question" in the crucible of extreme and unusual circumstances to show their mettle, and reveal their boundaries and relations through the linguistic breakdowns that ensue. The network of concepts has to be stretched to the limit in order to find what particular burden causes a break and where. (8)

If from a lion's mouth came noises sounding exactly like English would we take it that the lion was speaking? If we would develop thick metallic exo-skeletons would our concept of harm change? Can we causally effect the past? Can time travel backwards? Can something some call God have a body and thus a weight and still be God? Guided by our own linguist intuitions we philosophers invent examples of the above sort in which we "ask what we would say in

Nielsen, *After the Demise of the Tradition* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990). See also my "Can there be Justified Philosophical Beliefs?" *Lyyum*, vol. 46 (July, 1991), 235–270 for my most explicit arguments concerning non-consensus and its import.

strange cases: cases where the boundaries of the use of our terms are tested." Vendler's slogan is "a good deal of philosophy is grammar (in Wittgenstein's sense) in the crucible of imagination." (9)

That is—or so at least Vendler claims—the philosopher's distinctive *modus operandi*. A philosopher hears someone (usually another philosopher) say something conceptual or alternatively he thinks it himself and then he reacts. Typical examples are "To know something we must be certain of it," "We cannot know what is not true," "We can lie and still tell the truth," "Whatever you ought to do you must be able to do," or "All cans are constitutionally iff." Such philosophical propositions, all candidates for being true or false philosophical claims, are the philosopher's stock and trade. He considers examples such as the above and then, taking one or all of them *seriatim*, he tries to imagine, guided by his linguistic intuitions, circumstances, typically weird circumstances, in which we would not say one or another of the above. The philosopher, that is, dreams up wild counter-examples which would show that these utterances are not, as they purport to be, conceptual truths or what Wittgenstein called grammatical remarks holding for all possible worlds. The putative counter-examples tend to be far-fetched and indeed quite deliberately so for in probing our concepts the philosopher is interested in conceptual features that do not show up or make a difference in ordinary circumstances. The victim of the crime, for example, does not worry about the possibility of a transplanted brain when he identifies a person in a lineup. But in worrying about personal identity we—or so at least it is usually believed—must concern ourselves with weird cases like that and try to ascertain, guided by our linguistic intuitions, what we would say—particularly, as J. L. Austin liked to stress, when the case is rather fully described.⁹ The battery, or at least the basic tool kit, of

⁹ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962) and his *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961). See Keith Graham, *J. L. Austin: A Critique of Ordinary Language Philosophy* (Sussex, England: Harvester Press, 1977) and M. Furberg, *Saying and Meaning: A Main Theme in J. L. Austin's Philosophy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971).

philosophical skills required here are these: first “a sensitivity for language to ‘spot’ some features of our conceptual apparatus that have been overlooked, or distorted, and, second, a lively imagination to be able to conjure up examples in which these features will show up on the surface in the form of what we say.” (13)

IV

Suppose it is responded that this in effect turns philosophy into applied linguistics used for certain rather obscure or at least arcane purposes. What we need to do Arne Naess style is to take a survey of the linguistic behavior of competent speakers to ascertain what we would say when. Vendler thinks this way of viewing things is a complete mistake revealing an ignorance of the way linguistic philosophers proceed, of language, of what it is to be a competent speaker and of what sort of thing the competent speakers’ repertoire is. Vendler remarks:

How does [the philosopher] know what most people would or would not say in outrageous situations never before encountered? The answer is that *he*, a competent speaker of the language, would not say that . . . hence it follows that other speakers, equally competent, would not say so either. Since language cannot be private language, my intuitions ought to hold for others. Of course, they do not always do. And this is one source of philosophical disagreement. But, short of abandoning language as a means of communication altogether, one cannot object in principle to the method of regarding one’s own linguistic intuitions as intuitions about the language at large and the concepts it embodies. (14)

I speak English and am a native speaker of English. My basic linguistic intuitions—the most unproblematic ones—must be the same for all native and indeed all competent speakers of English. Without that we would not have a language. We cannot say “procrastination drinks” but we can say “dogs drink.” We can say “the cat died” but not “the rock died.” There are, of course, cases where a person’s linguistic intuitions are uncertain. There she, in seeking something more determinate, can work with parallel examples, spell out the troubling case more fully and draw out its implications. Moreover, she can in such circumstances ask others whether they

would not say that. Not so much just to get a yes or no answer but to see what they would say about the case, thus probing what we take to be our common linguistic intuitions. Where people would say different things—where linguistic intuitions clash or at least appear to—we should conclude either that the case has been under-described or that the intuitions just do clash and there is no fixed use here. Language *here* has more *lebensraum* than we expected. But then we cannot justifiably claim anything *here* about what we must say or cannot say. We should not assume a principle of sufficient reason in language. But this situation, where there are no stable linguistic intuitions, must be the exception and not the rule or we would not have natural languages at all or systems of effective communication. But we do have natural languages and systems of effective communication so there must be a very large repertoire of stable linguistic intuitions among native speakers of a given natural language. And this in turn says something about the stability of some of our concepts.

I can as such a speaker generally rely on my own linguistic intuitions in making philosophical arguments. We do not at all need to take a sociological survey of what most people would say. In most cases, where the claim is a philosophical claim, we can rely on our intuitions for we have very good reasons indeed of an ordinary empirical sort to believe that they are shared. In cases where our linguistic intuitions are at least initially unclear, as in Saul Kripke's case "Could Queen Elizabeth II have been born of other parents, say to Mr. and Mrs. Truman?", our way out of the bog toward an answer is by *careful reflection* on how we would describe this situation. This understanding may not at all come in a blinding flash. It may take time and effort. Your opinion may shift as a result of refining the examples as you draw analogies or contrasting scenarios. Repeatedly noting, as you go along, what you would say and relying on linguistic intuitions in that noting, you proceed by contrasting and comparing and reflecting carefully on the workings on site of the language you use.¹⁰ This, Vendler remarks, is what

¹⁰ J. L. Austin was, of course, the master of this. Vendler well stresses it and practices it as did Cavell in his earlier work. Cavell, in arguing for this procedure,

this armchair or beachwalking activity that is philosophical research comes to. We use language competently but we often do not, as Wittgenstein stressed, command a clear view of that use. The philosophical task is to enable us to command a clear view of the uses of our words where they are philosophically troubling. “We have to display that use to become aware of some unnoticed feature of some concepts. And one way of doing this is by producing examples and observing as it were our own linguistic responses.” (16)

We speak of concepts here hopefully to get at something which is not language-parochial but is a linguistic universal—something which gets expressed though often in different ways—in all languages. We also speak of concepts to get away from speaking of words and to focus instead on the various *uses* of words and the *causal factors behind* these uses. But it is not a humpty-dumpty situation with our use of words. We do not in general make words, taking them as mere noises, mean whatever we want them to. We are, in what we understand and in what we would say, deeply and pervasively constrained by our linguistic intuitions: intuitions which are *a given* for us as some linguistic intuitions will be for any speaker of a natural language. That, of course, does not mean that we all have the same linguistic intuitions (after all we do not all speak the same language) but the claim is only that any native speaker must be guided by some linguistic intuitions which for her (whoever she is) are just givens. If we are to be speakers at all, there is no alternative to being a speaker of a natural language and that puts constraints on what we can intelligibly say and think.

argued like Vendler and indeed, as I shall, for the indispensability here of linguistic intuitions but this he mistakenly thought made philosophy, including ordinary language philosophy, something quite distinct from an activity that would require the testable claims of empirical linguistics. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1969), 8–72 and 97–114. But see in response Jerrold Katz and Jerry Fodor, “The Availability of What We Say,” *Philosophical Review* LXXI (January 1963), 57–71; Richard Henson, “What We Say,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (January 1965); and Stanley Bates and Ted Cohen, “More on What We Say,” *Metaphilosophy* 3, no. 1 (January 1972), 1–24.

V

There are, as I noted at the beginning, these fundamental organizing concepts with which philosophy has traditionally been concerned.¹¹ Different words or phrases, of course, are used in different languages to express them and there is no one-to-one correspondence between word and concept. Still these same concepts are there in all languages at all times playing the same role as organizing concepts for human beings everywhere and at all periods of history. They may be part of the battery of what some linguists call “linguistic universals.” Moreover, it is these concepts that are also linguistic universals and are arguably innate which are the concepts concerning which we can employ our linguistic intuitions in such *gedanken* experiments to learn more about those concepts. “Our linguistic intuitions,” Vendler remarks, “can be used to learn more about identity, and change, knowledge and action, but not about insects, TV sets or symphonies.” (22) The former concepts—the great organizing concepts—lie deeper in our languages than the latter sort of concepts and it is more likely that they reflect our native endowment. This being so they are the concepts where the linguistic approach in philosophy is more plainly appropriate. With them reflection in our armchair in the way I have described rather than making experiments and observations is the way to proceed. To find out about the bald eagle you try to observe bald eagles in varied circumstances. To find out about knowledge, by contrast, you reflect guided by your linguistic intuitions. Moreover, in most cases our linguistic intuitions are firm and spontaneous. They typically, though not invariably, come immediately to mind when we are asked what we would and would not say. Given various examples like the ones we have seen above we immediately respond: you can’t say that or you would say that. Competent speakers standardly speak easily here and with authority. We know that this is what we say and that if we are going to speak English (say) we must in such a

¹¹ Hampshire, “Indentification and Existence” and Copleston, “Philosophical Knowledge.”

circumstance say that but we, along with this confidence, very often will be at a complete loss as to *why* we do so.

It is here where philosophers enter with their characteristic second-order job of giving, or trying to give, us criteria for such concepts as knowledge, belief, identity, good, justice, representation, and the like. We, as native speakers, correctly operate *with* these terms but to philosophize we must cultivate the ability to do something we do not often do, namely operating *upon* them: coming to learn how to specify the conditions of their use rather than just using the terms with the easy assurance and authority that anyone commands who has thoroughly learned the language in question.¹² Native speakers and like practiced persons standardly correctly use the terms of their language. This includes, of course, philosophers. The philosopher provides (if only in his own thoughts) sample utterances in doing those conceptual investigations that constitute philosophy and then attends to them reflecting on his linguistic intuitions concerning them. He uses this approach to try to find the *reasons* behind his linguistic intuitions.

When it comes to knowledge of our concepts, given to us through the knowledge of the use of our terms, what is correct (what constitutes genuine knowledge) is what we native speakers are “inclined to say, and the reasons, offered by linguists and philosophers, have to conform to it.” (25) Still the mastering of the vernacular does not presuppose the ability to produce reasons, linguistic or philosophical, for its correct use. For what is the correct use, the philosopher and the linguist as well, must just bow his head to the native speaker’s employment of the language though not at all to his account of that employment. It is in the giving of an account of *why* this use is correct—the second-order job—that philosophy and linguistic theory come into play. The native speaker in such a second-order context is no longer the authority.

VI

Let us now return to the objections of the scientistically oriented philosopher we initially set as an advisory to linguistic philosophy

¹² Ryle, *Philosophical Papers*, Volume II, 407–414.

and as a rejector of claims for the *autonomy* of philosophy. In speaking of the autonomy of philosophy we are speaking of philosophy as a distinct disciplinary matrix with its own criteria for whether its claims are or are not justified. First the scientific philosopher as well as the traditionalist will say that while the concepts analyzed by philosophers tell us how we *think* about reality still nothing follows from this about *the actual nature* of reality. Then the scientific philosopher will add, though not the traditionalist, what the actual nature of reality is, if it is to be discovered at all, will be discovered by science. Moreover, the scientific claim goes: the development of science at any given stage outstrips common-sense's conceptual framework. What is left, after science does its outstripping, are the leftovers of outdated science. The results obtained by linguistic philosophers are "at best, of anthropological interest: a description of our current concepts on a par with the description of our current beliefs, prejudices, superstitions, and the like." (31)

Vendler thinks we are now in a position to see that both of those objections are mistaken. A believer in religion or a believer in some political outlook, such as conservatism, liberalism or socialism, can at the very least entertain giving up her religion or her political outlook. But this is not true of a natural language with its conceptual system. Native speakers cannot so opt out of their languages. Even if they learn another language and come to use that instead of their mother tongue they do that by means of their native language. Their native language provides bridgeheads of understanding to the other language which are in no way optional or escapable as Vendler puts it,

One cannot think about anything without the concepts we actually have, and we cannot discuss anything without adhering to the rules that constitute our languages. Thus there is an *a priori*, unavoidable framework of speech and thought which imposes itself on our conception of the world and of ourselves. And the philosopher . . . is concerned with this framework: he tries to make explicit what we all "know" in a sense, but have to be reminded of, if we go astray. (31)

Our natural languages are all inter-translatable. The philosophical

conclusions we draw in one or another of these languages survive the change from one language to another. Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*, a rather typical example of linguistic philosophy, has survived translation into dozens of languages. I have used English words to signify these fundamental governing concepts that should be the primary subject matter of philosophy. But, given the fact that we can and do have translations here, though we do not always have one word equivalents, we have something that is plainly not language-parochial.

These concepts are historically stable, unlike some other concepts, to wit, God, science, religion, morality, which do, though within limits, change over time. As well as being specific language non-parochial our governing concepts by contrast to the above are ahistorical: they are as much a part of the conceptual repertoire of the stone age aborigine as that of the contemporary Parisian. Moreover, concepts such as science and technology, which are subject to historical change, cannot be understood except by people who have a mastery of those central ahistorical governing concepts. We cannot understand scientific results unless this is achieved by means of the conceptual apparatus we actually have and that involves an understanding and utilizing of governing concepts such as knowledge, truth and value. Linguistic change cannot affect the basic features of language and thus it cannot affect the fundamental concepts of our thinking: the fundamental concepts that we can only know by mastering a language. That is not a scientific knowledge or a theoretical knowledge but a kind of knowledge by *wont*. In coming to gain a more extensive understanding of that language, an understanding that yields a more commanding view of its workings, we come to have something which can only be built on knowledge of how to operate with these concepts. And that is a pre-theoretical knowledge which is just given to us as native speakers. It is something we just learn as we are socialized into a given culture with a distinct language, but it still is something, where linguistic universals are involved, that is pan-human, i.e. everyone has in a deep sense a structurally similar pre-theoretical knowledge. The knowledge we come to have when we gain a commanding view of the workings of our language, as a more theoretical knowledge, goes

beyond this knowledge by *wont* but it *presupposes* it and without it there could be no such theoretical knowledge, no such a commanding view. There would indeed be no view at all. Operating *upon* presupposes an ability to operate *with*.¹³ There is no scientific understanding of our language that could bypass such an understanding. Since the more specialized scientific understanding presupposes that understanding, there is no way the scientific understanding could replace it. What, on such a conception, the conceptual analysis of linguistic philosophy can achieve is very formidable indeed for it “reveals the fundamental features of the human mind, including the basic categories in terms of which we are able to understand the world and ourselves.” (34)

VII

What I want to say—and this is to give things a very non-Vendlerish turn—is that if something like this is true, and it seems to me to be at the very least reasonable to believe that it is, then philosophy drops out and is in effect replaced by the empirical study of language, by (broadly construed) linguistics. Nothing like a First Philosophy will be viable; there is no non-empirical *philosophical* knowledge guiding or governing science because it yields a knowledge foundational for science that science by itself cannot achieve.¹⁴ Philosophy as epistemology or as conceptual analysis does not attain the status of a distinctive disciplinary matrix yielding knowledge not obtainable by science. There is no philosophical discipline here serving as an overseer for science or everyday life. Native speakers, as Vendler shows, roughly following Wittgenstein and Ryle, have a knowledge by *wont* of their language; they, that is, *know how* to use it to make intelligible remarks which are, depending what they are, true or false or appropriate or inappropriate. This knowledge by *wont* is not scientific knowledge but it is not

¹³ See the references to Cavell given in note 10.

¹⁴ This was powerfully and distinctively argued for by Sidney Hook, *The Quest for Being* (New York: Greenwood, 1963). He did not, however, argue for it along Wittgensteinian lines.

philosophical knowledge either. It is the raw material, as Vendler shows, of philosophy (or much of philosophy) but it is also the raw material of linguistics. Both the philosopher and the linguist have to rely on what the native speaker says for what we would and would not say and what we must say and cannot say. But then in trying to explain or further characterize this use both the philosopher and the linguist make empirical generalizations about the workings of our language and thus of our concepts. I say “thus” for we, for the reasons Vendler gives following Wittgenstein, can have no non-linguistic access to our concepts.

The philosopher indeed has rather different interests and goes about things in a rather different way than the linguist, but still like the linguist she is making, or attempting to make, empirical generalizations about language. But this, quite plainly, is (though sometimes in a rather primitive way) to do science, to make empirical claims. These claims, Wittgenstein to the contrary notwithstanding, are testable in the same way typical scientific claims are and in the way that the linguist’s claims about language are. There is no *a priori*, purely “rational” insight that the philosopher can appeal to or some distinct mode of knowing, yielding distinctive philosophical knowledge. The philosopher’s remarks about the uses of terms or sentences in our language do not at all have that strange philosophical status but are bits of empirical knowledge concerning that use, studiable and establishable, not by *a priori* insight or metaphysical articulation (whatever that means) but by the humdrum empirical study of the uses of words or sentences, though the people doing the study must, at least to a certain degree, be the masters of the language they study *and* have the capacity to reflect on that ability.

This important fact about language and language-users, something which itself is empirically testable, is not a philosophical truth or a source of philosophical knowledge. In this important way, if such a linguistic turn is well-taken, philosophy does not kick itself upstairs but abdicates its claims to establish truth to a scientifically testable empirical study of language, i.e. to linguistics. If Vendler’s account is approximately correct, his beliefs about the status of philosophy to the contrary notwithstanding, philosophy so conceived has put itself out of business for we philosophers have no

claim to having gained some distinctive philosophical knowledge. First linguistic philosophy itself puts First Philosophy (metaphysical philosophizing) out of business and then it reveals how, beyond this negative task and some related Augean stable cleaning, it has nothing to say. Its positive claims are testable by the empirical study of language. It has no truth-claims or way of knowing or establishing what is or must be the case of its own.¹⁵

VIII

To speak just like that, without amplification and some elucidation, of the knowledge of the use of our language and thus of our concepts is to say something ambiguous. Sometimes it simply is taken to mean knowing how to use the terms in question. This is the pre-theoretical knowledge I have called a knowledge by *wont*. At other times, though building on that pre-theoretical knowledge, it is taken to be a theoretical knowledge about how those terms are used and why they are used in the way they are used. It seeks accurately to describe their use, to characterize it, to perspicuously display it. This is a second-order task which involves accurately describing, characterizing, and perhaps explaining the language, or perhaps the speech, in question and with it the concepts we use. Against linguistic philosophers, I have simply wanted to say that this description, characterization, and explanation of use are all empirical tasks that

¹⁵ Someone reflecting back on the classical dispute between Benson Mates and Stanley Cavell might say I make things too easy for myself in saying that this knowledge involving reflection is ordinary empirical knowledge. Well, I did say, like Cavell and like Vendler, that we do have to rely on the linguistic intuitions of native speakers in determining what we would say. But that we would say thus and so is an empirical fact about what native speakers would say and is testable by empirical observation of what they would say, though to make those observations and do that checking the observers and checkers would have to have some mastery of the language in question. But that does not impugn the empirical status of those claims. The utterances expressive of their use need not be empirical statements but their statements that they would say so and so are. What their usage is is an empirical fact, empirically ascertainable. Benson Mates, "On the Verification of Statements about Ordinary Language," *Inquiry* 1 (1958), 161–171 and Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* 1–43.

require no *a priori* philosophical insight or indeed any philosophical insight. They are, in principle, if not in practice, part of the domain of linguistics: the empirical study of language.

It is indeed true that the *reflective* element is different than in many empirical studies but not so different that what we have is something non-empirical or scientifically anomalous. With the bald eagle we have something brutally empirical, not requiring much in the way of reflection. We notice its coloration, wingspread, its tail feathers, the way it glides, etc. These are brutally, or relatively brutally, observational qualities. The linguistic case is somewhat different. Suppose the philosopher thinks that the claim that all cans are constitutionally iff is a mistaken claim. We do not always, he suspects, use “can” in that hypothetical way. He takes what he suspects to be a counter-example to the generalization (if you will, the philosophical hypothesis) of which he is suspicious. Suppose a skilled golfer at a green putts and misses and, throwing his club on the ground, cries “I could have holed it!” He tried as hard as he could, he had the ability and the opportunity (the shot was not extraordinarily difficult) and the desire and yet he missed it. The philosopher in question suspects this counter-example counts against the hypothetical analyses of “can” as “would have if . . .” Here it is not like simply observing the color of the bald eagle. He reflects on his use, thinks, that is, what he would say in such circumstances and in similar circumstances. He considers as well the causal background of his use. Yet it is an empirical fact whether he would or would not say such and such in such and such circumstances. He may wonder if his use of language in this type situation is unusual, if his idiolect is atypical, and to find that out he finds out what others would say. This, though pursued for a particular purpose, is like a sociological survey of the use of language. We have something that is through and through empirical and thus not, after all, philosophical, as either traditionalists or linguistic philosophers conceive of philosophy.

Vendler with his go-it-alone-notion of the logic of his language would appear at least to deny this. But such a denial, if that really is his intent, would be mistaken. Vendler remarks, as we have seen, that if the competent speaker of a natural language would not say

thus and so it follows that other speakers of that language would not say that either. Since our language cannot be private, the linguistic intuitions, Vendler tells us, *ought* to hold for others. But (*pace* Vendler) *ought* to is not *must*. (Again relying on our linguistic intuitions I realize that from the fact I ought to exercise it doesn't follow that I must exercise. That is just the way the language-game is played here.) It is indeed true that generally, given what a natural language is, there must be among competent speakers a wide range of shared linguistic intuitions. So if I, as a competent speaker of English, realize quite spontaneously that I would not say so and so then I can indeed *presume* that other equally competent speakers of the same natural language will not either. But a presumption is just that. It is not an entailment and it can be rebutted. In the above instance it may just happen that my idiolect is in such cases deviant and that I will depart from the normal linguistic regularities. Hence it is not the case that if I would not say such and such that it *follows* that others would not also. To know whether they would is to find out what others would say and that, Vendler and Stanley Cavell to the contrary notwithstanding, is an empirical matter. To know whether there is or isn't in a given language a linguistic regularity is an empirical matter to be authoritatively determined (as far as this is possible) by an empirical study of language.¹⁶ It is in short science with its systematic observing of linguistic behavior which settles what can be said in a given natural language. This is a matter of discovery, a discovering of what we do with words, and that is up to an empirical study of language to ascertain. It is, in fine, a scientific matter. The lone ranger relying on his linguistic intuitions cannot settle it. Again philosophy drops out or loses its autonomy. (Given traditional conceptions of philosophy that comes to the same thing.)

We can, of course, reasonably rely on the *presumption* of shared linguistic intuitions since they must hold in the vast majority of cases. Thus if I am thinking about the relation between ought and obligation, I realize that there are many things that I ought to do that I stand under no obligation to do. "Obligation" is a stronger term than "ought." It, unlike "ought," has a quasi-legal status. And

¹⁶ Paul Ziff, *Semantical Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1960).

“obligation” goes with “must” in a way that “ought” does not. If I have an obligation to do *x* I must do *x*.¹⁷ If I ought to do something it does not follow that I must do it. Knowing how to use these terms I have an understanding of the concepts ought and obligation. But in trying to give the reasons why there are these linguistic regularities, I can, in the way Vendler specifies, rely on my linguistic intuitions, though in reflecting on these regularities to try to gain some *theoretical* knowledge of the situation they are not all I rely on. But in gaining an understanding that this is what we would or would not say, I do not in the normal situation have to make any kind of empirical survey of the way native speakers use the terms being probed. I can rely on my own pre-theoretical knowledge here. However, if in saying things like my above remarks about “ought” and “obligation,” I get repeated denials or hesitancy from other competent speakers not just or even necessarily at all over my explanations of my use but of my very claims themselves about what we would say, then I would have reason to wonder about my linguistic competency here. In such a circumstance what we would say would have to be determined by an empirical investigation of how native speakers speak. The fixation of belief here is the same as it is in other straightforwardly empirical scientific issues. There is no high *a priori* road or indeed any non-empirical road at all.

IX

It is indeed true that we cannot think of anything without the concepts we actually have and that we cannot discuss anything without adhering the rules that are partially constitutive of our language. We cannot stand free from our language, like Atlas turning the world, and think our thoughts free of the constraints of our language. We can indeed set some concepts aside. Perhaps we no longer conceptualize things, or at least need to conceptualize

¹⁷ Of course the force of the “must” here is moral and legal, not logical or even causal.

things, in terms of sin, grace, God and immortality. But we can only set certain concepts of our language aside while using others—the bulk would have to remain in place in our deliberating here—and it seems tolerably evident that what I have called the organizing concepts of our thought and action will always remain in place.¹⁸ They are concepts which are ahistorical and do not have a rise and decline with the rise and fall of certain *lebensformen*.

Our natural languages just do provide a framework of speech and thought which imposes itself on our conception of the world and ourselves. But it is at best misleading to think of it, as Vendler does, as an *a priori* framework. For it is just an empirical fact that we are competent speakers of one or more natural languages with the distinctive semantical and syntactical structures that they have and it is just another further empirical fact (if indeed it is a fact) that some of these structures are also linguistic universals with analogous machinery in all other languages. We have nothing here that is *a priori*.

Vendler claims that linguistic change cannot effect the basic features of language and thus it cannot affect the fundamental concepts of our thinking. This I think is a strong claim, though still a somewhat indeterminate one, but charitably interpreted a plausible one all the same. Where the claim is most plausible is where it applies to our fundamental governing concepts: existence, knowledge, identity, truth and value. What in its very abstract nature it is for something to be true, to have value, to exist, what it is for someone to know something, are all matters which hardly seem like something that would change over time. *What* is it we know or think we know, *what* are the lists of established truths, *what* things we will value, will, to a considerable degree, vary, though not entirely so, over cultural space and historical time. But what it is for something

¹⁸ This, of course, is a familiar Wittgensteinian point. But Davidson's arguments about the incoherence of conceptual relativism, while distinct, would, if sound, support it. I might add, by the way, that while they *may* not be effective against *localized* conceptual relativism, they seem at least to be soundly made against *global* conceptual relativism. Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 183–198.

to be true, what knowledge is, what it is for something to be valued, probably do not change historically or between cultures.

However, other of our fundamental concepts do not seem to be so "eternal," though it is not clear to me on what principle we can sort out those that are and those that are not. Morality, religion, law, person, power, politics, mind are all fundamental concepts. Yet at least some and perhaps all to some extent change over time. Religion, law, power and politics are the plainest cases. Attempts to specify the essence of religion have been notoriously unsuccessful. Between Zen Buddhism and Islam there are vast differences. The former, by some, has not been thought to be a religion at all but a kind of morality or way of life. Moreover, when we look at primitive religions (the religions of non-literate cultures) and contrast them with the religions of modern complex societies and try to sort out the difference between magic and religion we also have difficulty in distinctively identifying religion. We have, it appears at least, a changing concept specifiable by a host of often loosely related family resemblances. Similar things should be said about law. And power—in its very use and not just in the explanation of its use—changes. The concept that Machiavelli, Hobbes and Foucault are talking about is by no means identical, though I do not deny there are family resemblances. Over time there have been changes in our very concept of power. There have been changes in our *actual* talk and not just in our talk *about* our talk.

Even, though less clearly and more arguably, the very concepts of morality, mind and person change historically and culturally. The concept of morality for the classical Greeks and for Westerners of the modern era, particularly for Jews and Christians, does not seem to be exactly the same concept. Duties, obligations, and rights, concepts which are such prominent features of modern morality, if they have anything like those roles at all, do not have very similar roles for the Greeks. Greek morality and modern morality are, at least arguably, importantly different. Moreover, from some contemporary philosophers, J. L. Mackie and David Gauthier, to take two prominent examples, there comes arguments for jettisoning much of the concept of morality as archaic floatsam and the retaining of only a trimmed down conception of morality: that part of

morality that is rationally sustainable.¹⁹ This might very well lead to an alteration of the very concept of morality.

Similar things obtain for mind and person, though there may here be a confusion between second-order and first-order matters. For mind and person we get from Patricia Churchland and Paul Churchland (among others) a roughly similar (in underlying conception) error theory to the error theory we get from J. L. Mackie and David Gauthier.²⁰ This with the Churchlands is probably a scientific metaphysics that rests on a not inconsiderable amount of conceptual confusion. But it, and more moderate things, are enough to make it not at all evident that the concept of mind and the concept of person are eternal, unchanging concepts. But whatever it is that should be said here we still have something not to be settled by philosophy—that is by philosophical argument—but by scientific investigation.²¹

¹⁹ J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsmith: Penguin Books, 1977) and David Gauthier, "Morality, Rational Choice and Semantic Representation," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 5, issue 2 (Spring 1988), 173–221 and his "Moral Artifice," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (June 1988), 385–418. This kind of theory was classically articulated by David Hume and Edward Westermarck.

²⁰ Patricia Smith Churchland, *Neurophilosophy: Toward a Unified Science of the Mind/Brain* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986). See the discussion of it in *Inquiry* (1988). See also references in note 6.

²¹ What I have argued here might be resisted. It might be claimed that here I am too like an ordinary language philosopher. I just assume, perfectly uncritically, *the truth is in the use*. But a core claim of the error theory is to challenge that. Ordinary people, they claim, think that good or goodness is so and so and their beliefs get enshrined in ordinary use. But, error theorists claim, the plain person is systematically mistaken about what good or goodness is. People—or rather most people—think that there is some mysterious non-natural property which goodness has but there is plainly no such property. We do not even have a coherent conception of what we are talking about here. All we actually have are *projected* emotions. In making moral judgments we are really expressing and evoking our feelings but we think we are making assertions about a mysterious noumenal moral and otherwise normative realm and that belief gets enshrined in our ordinary use and usage. This error theorist claim confuses second-order talk (talk about talk) with first-order talk. It confuses *beliefs about* our use with *our use*. Truth is in the use in that what a concept is is determined by the uses of the terms expressive of that concept. To come to understand, in the most primitive sense of "understand," what the concept of good is is to discover how "good" and equivalent terms in other languages are used in the language-games in which they have a home. Plain folks knowing how to use "good",

Either the uses of “morality,” “law,” “religion,” “mind” change over time or they do not. And whether they do and how much is an empirical matter to be settled by science. The only place where I can see a claim for philosophy being made is over whether the changes in use are sufficient to mark a change in concept. But here

also understand in that ground floor way the concept of goodness but this does not at all mean they understand its correct analysis. They might, while knowing how to use “good” perfectly well, have through and through mistaken views—sometimes really crudely mistaken views—about what the correct analysis of good is. And the way in which they are mistaken might be just in the way the error theory claims plain persons (including, of course, some philosophers) are mistaken. Moreover, and distinctly, people often, indeed perhaps even pervasively, might be badly mistaken about what *things* are actually good. They could be in error in these two ways while perfectly correctly using “good.” However, what the concept of goodness is is determined by the use of the term “good” and its cognates in other languages. What that use is is determined by the linguistic behavior of native speakers when they are making actual moral and other normative and evaluative claims, having moral (and the like) doubts, asking moral (and the like) questions and things of this sort, but not when they are *theorizing* about their use: telling us what good means or speculating about what goodness is. These last sorts of linguistic behavior do not determine what the concept is for they are second-order comments on that concept and they could only be made where there is in place a concept to comment on.

There is no stepping back here and saying native speakers are wrong in their actual use. It makes no sense to say native speakers use “good” in such and such a way but its real use is quite different for this actual use is mistaken. What a term in ordinary language means is determined by how native speakers use that term. In that way, and in that way only, is the truth in the use.

Jocelyne Couture (no friend of ordinary language philosophy) has resisted my ordinary language proclivities in something like the way I have argued against in this note. She is not to be burdened with how I have put the matter here or with the content of my response. Paul Edwards, years ago, in his discussion of Mackie’s first and most blunt statement of the error theory, criticized Mackie along similar lines to the way I have above. Mackie, as far as I have been able to ascertain, neither responded to nor modified his earlier views in the light of that—or so it seems to me—to the point critique. See J. L. Mackie, “The Refutation of Morals,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (1946) and Paul Edwards, *The Logic of Moral Discourse* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1955). That notwithstanding, I think, properly understood, there is still considerable point to the error theory, a point not undermined even if the above criticisms are exactly on the mark. I have tried to show what that point is in Kai Nielsen, “Problems for Westermarck’s Subjectivism” in *Edward Westermarck: Essays on his Life and Works*, Timothy Stroup, ed. (Helsinki, Finland: Societas Philosophica Fennica, 1982), 122–143.

there is still no room for philosophical argument at least as straightforwardly construed. What we do here is to make stipulations for certain pragmatic purposes. I see nothing we could gain here that would be a plausible candidate for philosophical knowledge or philosophical truth.

X

Vendler maintains, as we have seen, that linguistic intuitions can be used to learn more about identity, change, knowledge, truth, but not about birds, flowers or airplanes or proletarians. That seems fair enough, but—and the last argument in the last section is relevant here—Vendler claims too much for linguistic analysis. He sees it as revealing the fundamental features of the human mind. We learn through reflecting on the use of “thought,” “knowledge,” “belief” more about our concepts. We deepen our understanding of our concepts and with that our understanding of the world. Surely there is something to that but perhaps not as much as Vendler and some others have thought. For, as we have seen with concepts such as religion, morality, law and power, such analyses may not take us very far or at all give us what we on reflection want. Analysis can in good underlaborer fashion break some rather gross confusions about these things, but little more. An analysis of “religion,” for example, is not likely to settle the question of whether there are any justified religious claims or whether we have good reasons for believing in God. Similarly, an analysis of “law” is not likely to be of much help in answering the challenge of whether the law pervasively functions as an ideological instrument to protect the perceived interests of the dominant classes. A linguistic analysis of “morality” or “moral” will not tell us whether Rawls’s two principles of justice are justified or whether there are any moral rights that must be respected come what may. An analysis of the concept of power will not tell us whether Foucault is justified in claiming that in our societies there are well camouflaged forms of power that deeply constrain us even when we are the least aware of that constraint. In such contexts linguistic analysis (and most particularly ordinary language philosophy) may not be such a powerful tool to

deepen our insight into such things as religion, morality and politics as its partisans think.

All that could be true and Vendler's claim still might hold good for the great organizing concepts of existence, identity, knowledge, truth, and value. But even here there are problems that I think linguistic philosophers (and again most particularly ordinary language philosophers) do not adequately face. Vendler remarks that as the physicist questions nature so the philosopher questions concepts. The physicist is, of course, importantly constrained by his observational data no matter how theory-laden his observations are. But he is not constrained by what native speakers say about nature. He is not constrained, at least not now, by folk cosmology. The concepts of everyday life about matter, process, stuff and particle can be safely set aside by the modern physicist. He is not beholden to ordinary use or at least not in any direct, obvious and strong way. But the philosopher who provides knowledge of our governing concepts starts with, and returns to, a knowledge of the ordinary use of the terms expressive of those concepts.²² They, in the way Vendler has brought out, are strongly normative for what he can on his own account justifiably claim. His analyses must conform to that use; he cannot discard or supercede it. If, for example, the philosopher says that to say something is good is to say that it answers to interests and someone provides counter-examples of ordinary uses of "good," where this generalization does not hold, then the philosopher's generalization is disconfirmed. The philosopher in such contexts can only give us an analysis of what in a strong sense we already know. He cannot correct that knowledge or bypass it. He cannot coherently say the use of "knowledge" and "truth" is thus and so but that is not what our concept of knowledge and truth are really like. So, to repeat, in an important sense he only tells us what we already know. His task is the purely second-order task of enabling us to command a clear view of the way our language is used in various language-games and to perspicuously represent what we know. But if his putatively clear view or per-

²² Alice Ambrose, "Commanding a Clear View of Philosophy," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* XLIX (1975-76), 5-21.

spicuous representation does not square with or conform to the actual use of the terms in question his putatively perspicuous representation is not genuinely perspicuous. He has not commanded a clear view. The physicist, by contrast, is not so limited. People believed, and at one time not unreasonably, that the sun goes around the earth and the earth stands still but they were mistaken and physics can show why. Perhaps it is an exaggeration to say that the physicist does not have to care a fig for ordinary use here but he surely is not constrained by it. He studies nature directly not the ordinary use of the term "nature," "process," "matter" and the like. So that is a big difference between natural science and philosophy.²³

So it does seem that Vendler, following Ryle and Wittgenstein and a host of others, is not right in claiming that the philosopher questions concepts in a relatively analogous way to the way the physicist questions nature. The linguistic philosopher indeed studies concepts, and for the very central ones at least, he studies them by carefully describing and displaying our uses of the words for these central concepts. For knowing what knowledge or truth or value is there is no other way to know but by first taking careful note of our use here and then to clearly characterize it. There is no bypassing our pre-theoretical knowledge here. In a way which is utterly disanalogous to physics, the philosopher's task is still at least in part a way of telling us what we already know.

It is not unimportant to ask if there is really much more to know here. Does not the pretheoretical knowledge carry most of the weight? Our philosophical interest, on this account, (to take an example) is with the meaning of truth, that is, with a theoretical understanding of the use of "truth" or its cognate expressions in other languages. We do not just want to know how to use "true," something we can safely assume we know anyway, but to be able to say what we are doing when we use "true." But that seems like a rather arcane and pedantic interest. What one would think that reflective people would want to know is what important truths are

²³ Alvin Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), Chapter 7.

there and how do we know they are really truths? They would also want to know what in various scientific domains and in morality and politics are the stable criteria, if there indeed are criteria, for a claim being true. In evolutionary biology, for example, certain claims are made. How can we ascertain if they are true? Similarly in politics many claims are said by some at least to be true. How can we ascertain which ones, if any, really are true? These things are the sorts of things that we would want to know about truth. But it is not obvious that philosophy as conceptual analysis is of much help here. (This is not, of course, to give to understand that First Philosophy is.) Getting clear about the *meaning* of truth is not likely to be of much value here except in the negative sense of warning us to not confuse questions about what *truth means* with questions of *how we test the truth of various claims*. To know that the assertive redundancy account of truth or the correspondence theory of truth is correct tells us nothing about what are the *tests* for propositions being true in various domains.²⁴

²⁴ Traditional philosophy and linguistic philosophy (ordinary language philosophy) both assume the *autonomy* of philosophy. (That may not always have been true of traditional philosophy, but at least since Kant that has been true.) Analytical philosophers of the disposition of Carnap, Quine and Davidson look upon their work, even where like Carnap they accepted a significant analytic/synthetic distinction, as *science*. Logic (a tool of philosophy), in a manner similar to (if not identical with) mathematics, is a formal science. Where I say philosophy becomes linguistics (that is, crucially relies on an empirical characterization of how language works) and, so I conclude, philosophy drops out, Carnap, Quine, et. al. would have *in principle* no trouble with it becoming linguistics and thus being an empirical science, though they would (no doubt) doubt that linguistics, at least as it is actually practiced, is likely to be of much value here. I, in turn, would reply that whatever linguists do, the claims made about use here are empirical claims about what linguistic regularities there are and could be, given the resources of natural language, and that is what use rests on. They could, in turn, very well agree with us, but respond that formal science (namely logic) plays, and indeed should play, a greater role here in explaining use than linguistics. I, in turn, have no *in principle* difficulty with this claim of the formalist. As long as it is not denied by the formalist, as it need not and indeed should not be, that whether we have a concept of *x* and what that concept is (where “*x*” is a term of our common life and not just a technical term) is determined by what use “*x*” has in the language-games of our natural languages. *Perhaps* some bits of a particular logic do best, of the alternatives available, depict or elucidate how a given concept works or best shows *how* a string of tokens, antecedently recognized to be

Similar things can and should be said about our knowledge of the concepts of knowledge and value. If philosophy is the kind of knowledge of our fundamental governing concepts that has just been alleged then it is not clear that it can come to much for it cannot answer (or give us a procedure for answering) claims about what types of knowledge-claims are justified, what moral or aesthetic valuations are justified, what claims about persons and society are true and the like. First Philosophy sought to tell us the truth about nature and God, people and society, morality and the good life, including the truth about how we should live our lives. Besides in its underlaborer capacity of getting rid of some rather plain foolishness here, it is not evident that conceptual analysis can help much in these traditional endeavors. Its work here should be purely negative: purely therapeutic.

meaningful, is meaningful. That is an empirical matter to be ascertained by which models best our use of terms and sentences. I am perhaps too luddite in my skepticism about the actual pay off of formalism here. But, be that as it may, on such a conception, philosophy traditionally conceived as an autonomous discipline drops out and instead philosophy becomes some mix of formal science (logic and mathematics) and empirical science or—though less plausibly—perhaps just formal science. (There have been philosophers who have wished for philosophy to become simply logic, though to make this even remotely plausible the use of “logic” had to be stretched or philosophy very much restricted.) As long as it still in some way makes room for critique, I have no *in principle* difficulty with that, though I am skeptical, unless it takes the form of a critical theory of society, about whether philosophy construed as science will actually accomplish much that is not better accomplished by the traditional sciences (including, of course, logic). (Again, there is the slogan that philosophy is logic, but it is radically unclear what this could mean. It is one thing to say that logic is a useful tool for philosophy—perhaps it is, perhaps it isn’t—but to say philosophy is logic or reduces to logic is radically unclear. How is it that problems of aesthetics, philosophy of mind, social philosophy, epistemology, moral philosophy, legal philosophy are reduced to problems of logic? It looks as if here we have something which is a little better than a slogan.)

What I was concerned to show in the body of my essay is that linguistic philosophy (principally ordinary language philosophy) is not an autonomous discipline, that as an activity its value lies in its dissolving traditional philosophical puzzlement and the claims of traditional philosophy, including its claims to say something substantively significant about our great organizing concepts: existence, identity, knowledge, truth and value. But linguistic philosophy can, if practised astutely, let the fly out of the fly bottle. Its value is exclusively negative and therapeutic.

Even systematic linguistic philosophy, which tells us something about our fundamental governing concepts and their interrelations, namely our concepts of existence, identity, knowledge, truth and value, only clearly display, picture if you will, what we already know. No philosophical claim can gainsay the pretheoretical truths we native speakers know concerning these governing concepts, though perhaps philosophy can explain why we have these uses of language and it can, if well done, dispel, as Wittgenstein stressed, bad explicit or implicit philosophy where people make mistaken generalizations about their language. But unlike the natural sciences philosophy, taken as an autonomous discipline, can provide no new knowledge of the way things are. It cannot, as philosophers once thought it could, say that while people think the world, human beings, society, and morality are thus and so that this is really not so. It is instead thus and so. Of course, if it could say those things, that would really make philosophy exciting, something worth thinking through the night for—or indeed several nights—but, if linguistic philosophy is near to the mark in its views about what the philosophical tradition can really yield, then the knowledge it provides is (a) comparatively trivial and (b) really knowledge of the type more adequately gained by a systematic empirical study of language. But isn't that our situation? Isn't that a telling it like it is?

Whatever its self-image, philosophy is not, where it takes this linguistic turn, an autonomous discipline with distinctive knowledge-claims. But there is, as well, no turning back to the Grand Tradition of First Philosophy. Linguistic philosophy in its early iconoclastic phase, when it was destroying houses of cards, made it quite apparent that such conceptions of First Philosophy were no less mythical than natural theology. That tradition—the Grand Tradition—is or at least should be at an end. My concern here is to show that, where not utterly therapeutic, linguistic philosophy, with its greater modesty, yields us nothing worth staying up all night for. But the point about therapy should not be lost. Fuzziness gets localized and sufficient clarity is sometimes attained to dispel a specific bafflement. These negative results can have a certain value. We can usefully practice linguistic philosophy as a kind of therapeutic enterprise. As long as people get tangled up in trying to gain a

steady view of our concepts, such therapy is justified, though once we see what is going on here it is less urgent. People are not usually actually made ill from this. They are just, in certain domains, fuzzed up in their heads. Someone might be a very good working biologist while talking the worst philosophical rot about biology.

I will explain a bit what I mean in speaking of a therapeutic enterprise. There is a very strong temptation on our part to say something like this. Philosophers might be right about our concepts and still wrong about reality. What we want to know is what knowledge, truth, causation, goodness, existence really are—are, as it were, in their essence or in their fundamental nature and not just in their use or even in a perspicuous display of their use: a display, that is, of the terms expressive of these concepts. The power of certain linguistic philosophers, Vendler among them, but most fundamentally and originally Wittgenstein, is to show that this is a spurious endeavor born of a failure to understand these concepts and the role they play in the stream of life. There is and can be no such standing outside our fundamental governing concepts. It would, however, be a bad understanding of this which would lead us to conclude from this that we are conceptually imprisoned, held captive by a certain conceptual relativism rooted in culturally variable forms of life. This is not the case for (among many reasons) these governing concepts have no significant historical development and are culturally ubiquitous. They have their strategic employments in the lives of all human beings. But these are basically the same employments. The Tradition was not wrong in thinking that they are pivotal concepts of great human importance. But it was wrong—and centrally so—in thinking that there was anything very exciting, deeply insightful or guiding of human conduct, that philosophy or any other discipline could say about them.²⁵

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²⁵ I am indebted to Jocelyne Couture for perceptive comments on an earlier version of this essay. That I continue to see virtues in ordinary language is not her fault.