The Appeal to Ordinary Language

P. L. Heath

The Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 2, No. 6. (Jan., 1952), pp. 1-12.

Stable URL:

http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-8094%28195201%292%3A6%3C1%3ATATOL%3E2.0.CO%3B2-T

The Philosophical Quarterly is currently published by The Philosophical Quarterly.

THE

PHILOSOPHICAL

QUARTERLY

THE APPEAL TO ORDINARY LANGUAGE[1]

Belief in the philosophic efficacy of ordinary language is a recurrent habit in British Philosophy, and can be regarded, according to taste, as a redeeming virtue or a besetting vice.   Whichever view we take, there is no denying the importance of the matter ;   for if the belief is correct it provides a very simple way of disposing of immense quantities of meta-physical and other argument, without the smallest trouble or exertion ; whereas if it is wrong, then preoccupation with it is largely a waste of time and ought not to be taken seriously.   This paper argues for the latter alter-native ;   but it only attempts to rebut the appeal to ordinary language as a (or the) method of doing philosophy, and is not itself intended to endorse any particular conception of the true subject-matter of philosophy or of the proper way to pursue it.   That it is primarily a question of method can be seen from this, that though, traditionally, the appeal has been used to counter the claims of metaphysicians of all persuasions, its present revival is at least partly directed against theories, such as Analysis and Phenomenal-ism, which are not at all metaphysical, at least in intention.   No doubt there are other reasons for this particular dispute, but I have no concern with them here ;   nor am I anxious to express disagreement (or agreement) with the general opinions of any of the authors referred to in what follows ; I simply try to show that some of the arguments that they use are not good arguments, that they depend on assumptions which are not reasonable, and that attempts to put forward a studied colloquialism as the sole and sufficient touchstone of philosophical propriety have therefore little to recommend them.

The thesis I have in mind to criticise can be formulated somewhat as

[1]A paper read at a meeting of the Scots Philosophical Club, Aberdeen, May 1951.

follows : ' Philosophical problems are generally, if not always, due to un-
noticed or unadvertised departures from Standard English, and are to be
solved, or cured, as the case may be, by pointing out the normal usage of
the words employed and the normal grammatical form of the sentences
in which they appear. For ordinary language is correct language '. I hope
this is reasonably fair. The reference to ' Standard English ' comes from
the introduction to a recent *réchauffé* of essays on this theme,[2] and suggests
the passing remark that many writers who have decanted upon it, there
and elsewhere, seem to take little account of the existence of other languages
whose structure and idiom are very different from English (Standard or
otherwise), but which seem to be equally, if not more, capable of engendering
metaphysical confusion. Whether we are to conclude from this that philo-
sophical theories are relative to the languages in which they are enunciated,
is by no means clear. There is little to be said for such a view, and much
against it, but I do not intend to say it here.[3]

A second, and rather less trivial point is that the expression ' Standard
English ' suggests that the uses of the language are uniform and well-estab-
lished. Though little or nothing has been done to verify this empirically,
writers who appeal to Standard English display a surprising confidence and
authority in pronouncing upon the proper, normal, literal, primary, true,
correct, or dominant meanings of words and phrases. It is surprising,
because if you look up what the linguists have to say on the subject,[4] you
find that this strictly normative conception of vocabulary and grammar
is completely out of date, and has been for centuries. To the vast majority
of modern linguists, ' Standard English ' is no more than a trade-label
annexed to a particular dialect, and has no special status or authority,
apart from the (irrelevant) social approval accorded to those who happen
to speak it. ' Correctness ', if it means anything at all, means conformity
with the prevailing mode of some specified group ; it has no reference to
any set of absolute rules, for there are none such. All that the modern
grammarian looks for are the prevailing patterns and regularities within a
language as it is actually used ; except where conventional uniformities
have been imposed by earlier grammarians, these patterns are mainly due
to the natural tendency of speech forms to accommodate themselves to one
another, owing to analogies of sound, shape or sense. Save *per accidens*
there is no logic in the matter, no privilege, and no permanency. People
talk as it suits them—primarily, one imagines, to be understood, and it is
the task of the grammarian to describe and classify these activities, not to
judge them. Belief to the contrary is merely an obstructive superstition,
surviving mainly among schoolmasters and formal logicians, whose excuse,
like that of most other tories, amounts to no more than a vested interest

[2]*Logic and Language*, ed. A. G. N. Flew (Oxford, 1951).

[3]cf. L. J. Cohen ' Are philosophical theses relative to language ? ' *Analysis*, April
1949.

[4]Cf. among many others, L. Bloomfield : *Language* (London, 1935) and O. Jespersen :
The Philosophy of Grammar (London, 1924). The latter's *Mankind, Nation and Individ-
ual* (London, 1946) concedes rather more to the normative view.

in, or reverence for, the *status quo*. Why it should have been thought to deserve consideration as a philosophical principle, it is by no means easy to imagine.

This is not, of course, **meant** to imply that there is nothing to be said for ordinary language as a philosophical model ; but it does bring out certain weaknesses in the attempt to construe it as a standard. It shows, I fancy, that the familiar and overworked analogy between logical and grammatical rules is about due for retirement, and that the fashionable conception of ordinary language as a static field of signs in a fixed or fixable relationship to a rigid structure of concepts and linguistic rules is, to say the least, an hypothesis. It shows also that the attempt to convict perfectly respectable philosophers of illiteracy, or of the perpetration of ungrammatical gibberish, is either naive or disingenuous ; for what is complained of is not lack of grammar, even in the textbook sense, but incoherence or absence of meaning, resulting (it is said), from the juxtaposition of terms which are incapable of being brought into intelligible relation with one another. Such crimes may have been committed, but it cannot possibly be correct to construe them as breaches of grammatical or linguistic ' laws ', if these are merely descriptive in character. If recourse be had at this point to the ' logic ' of language, we may reply that this notion is itself exceedingly obscure, and that off-hand references to the man-in-the-street, John Doe, Bertie Wooster or the *Strand Magazine*, or the retailing of illustrative anecdotes and charades, or, again, appeals to a hitherto undetected ' sense of linguistic propriety ' are not really very impressive methods of establishing the ' correct ' or ' normal ' usage of given words and phrases. So far as they serve any pur-pose at all, it is the opposite one, of bringing out the variety and fluidity of these usages, and the arbitrary character of any proposal to select and grade them by reference to ' dominance ' or ' propriety '. And this is con-firmed by the disputes which commonly break out, even among exponents of the method, when attempts at armchair lexicography are made in this way.

It is by no means uncommon for a philosopher, in expounding his views, to make use of academic or technical terms ; but in doing so he falls an easy prey to the devices of an opponent who employs the vernacular method. By exposing such technicalities in contrast to more homely expressions it is easy for the latter to make them look absurd, and ultimately meaningless, so that the whole argument in which they occur is compromised or dis-credited. Thus Mr. Toulmin, arguing recently against Ethical Intuitionism,[5] picks on the admittedly hideous expression ' Rational Faculty of Immediate Apprehension '. He then quotes Bertie Wooster, to the effect that ' we Woosters have a fine sense of what is fitting ', and goes on to affirm that ' " Rational Faculty of Immediate Apprehension " would make Bertie's jaw drop a mile '. It would indeed. But what does this prove ? Nothing whatever, so far as I can see, except that Bertie is a moron, not a moral philosopher, and that we knew anyway. But it *suggests* that since the offend-

[5] ' Knowledge of Right and Wrong ', in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1949-50.

ing phrase is unknown to (let us waive the point) commonsense, it therefore stands for nothing recognisable to commonsense; that it is therefore improper, as a description of whatever Bertie was talking about, and so, in the absence of any plausible alternative designatum, meaningless. Now there is no need to deny that the phrase is verbiage, a ' theorist's solemnity ' of the first water, and doubtless misleading in its own associations; it is not even necessary to maintain that it *does* stand for anything. All that wants pointing out here is that this alleged meaninglessness does not follow automatically from the fact that the Woosters of this world have never heard of it;—nor, for that matter, would anything of consequence follow if they had. Mr. Toulmin, needless to say, has other and better arguments than this—indeed I hardly care to accuse him of using it *as* an argument, but it is an easy and common assumption, that because many technical expressions *are* used vacuously, therefore any sesquipedalian and unfamiliar locution must necessarily fall into the category of nonsense. It is a mistake. And it obscures the fact that technicalities are sometimes very useful.

There is a further temptation, when one is engaged in blackballing a technicality, to use the material instead of the formal mode of speech. This lends an agreeable gusto to the proceedings, but it is apt to alarm people unnecessarily. ' There are no such things as volitions ! ' seems startling intelligence—until one later finds the author (Professor Ryle, of course) talking unconcernedly about ' efforts of will '[6]. As who should say ' There are no such things as railway accidents ! ' only to add in a whisper, ' They all occur according to the laws of physics '.

From those who object to a technical term in place of an everyday one, it is no long step to those who cannot abide plain words used in technical or recondite senses. An example of this, and one which is, again, incidental to the main argument, may be found in a recent article by Mr. K. E. M. Baier.[7] Referring to the (correct) usage of the word ' assert ', he claims, on no less authority than his own, that it implies a doubt as to the truth and/or sincerity of what was said by the person described as asserting it. And ' thus, contrary to a popular view, " asserting something " does not mean the same as " expressing one's views about something " or " contending that something is the case " or, " making an utterance which is capable of being true or false " '. Here again, it is neither necessary nor worthwhile to argue that ' asserting ' *does* mean the same as any of these; (though if Mr. Baier's interpretation is correct, it is hard to see why anyone should want to use the verb in the first person singular, present tense). The point is simply that if these other usages represent ' a popular view ', neither Mr. Baier nor anyone else can have any reason for objecting to them. And even if they do not (supposing that ' popular ' means ' popular amongst an incapable minority of philosophers '), there is no way of showing them

[6] *The Concept of Mind* (London, 1949) ch. iii.

[7] ' Decisions and Descriptions ' in *Mind*, LX, 238. For a rather similar case, **cf.** the controversy over the word ' selves ' between Mr. J. R. Jones and Mr. A. G. N. Flew (*Mind*, LVIII, 229, 231 and LIX, 234).

to be positively erroneous ; the worst that can be said is that they are ' loose ', ' extended ', or ' specialised ' applications of a vague term in common use. Which is to say nothing in the least reprehensible or extraordinary about them.

Now what is at the bottom of all this terminological hyperaesthesia, and all the whistle-blowing and knuckle-rapping and scolding that goes along with it ? Aside from its uses as a technique of controversy, it appears to depend on no more substantial a foundation than the egregious Fido— ' Fido ' fallacy, newly emerged from the kennel to which it was but recently (and rightly) consigned by Professor Ryle himself ; on the one hand we are told that no dog is to have more than one name, and that a plain one ; on the other, that once a name has been assigned to a dog it is never to be used, even as a nickname, for any other one. Any departure from this is to be instantly prosecuted as a misuse of language, breach of good grammar or wilful deviation from Standard English ; and ignorance of the law is not to be accepted as an excuse.

Within certain limits this programme is a perfectly rational one ; for the application of logic to discourse it is, indeed, essential that the terms should be well-defined and univocal in their reference, and so far as the practice of philosophy depends upon logical procedures a similar exactness is, in principle, desirable. Where this theory goes entirely off the rails is in supposing that the casual and irregular speech-habits of everyday intercourse are somehow able to furnish unique and authoritative criteria for the interpretation of terms in common use amongst philosophers. It is just because they do *not* do this, that so many philosophers have felt obliged to employ technical terms and neologisms, even where this has made it difficult for other people to understand what they were talking about. The point of such philosophical rigmaroles is the same as that of legal rigmaroles. Both may look to be unintelligible, and often needlessly so, but properly handled they do enable something precise and testable to be said.[8] The danger, in both cases, is the creation of fictions ; the advantage, that ' correctness ' does mean something definite, in relation to the self-made rules and definitions adopted ; it is not, of course, reasonable to complain of departures from the ordinary use of terms, since this is done deliberately, and can be judged only according to its adequacy, or necessity, for the purpose in hand. There is a good deal more reason to complain of those who, by *not* using a specialised terminology, muddle themselves and other people quite as effectively as the man who makes his own will. Philosophers cannot avoid technical distinctions, and so if they will not use technical terms, they are obliged to follow the example of Locke and Hume, and press non-technical ones into the same service. This creates more trouble than it is worth, since the fixed and the fluid senses get hopelessly mixed. Look at the ruin which has come, in consequence, upon the word ' idea ', and many others. The same thing is already happening with many of the

[8]This point seems to have escaped Mr. G. J. Warnock (' Metaphysics in Logic ', in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1950-51).

happy colloquialisms launched into currency by Professor Ryle ; as their copyright expires and they pass into general circulation, they come to operate as technical jargon-words of a misleadingly informal and concrete kind ;—misleading, because while it is not only permissible but essential to provide regulations for the correct use of technical terms, it is not justified in the case of non-technical ones, which have to be understood in context. Where the same words are used for both, confusion follows. The writer is apt to persuade himself that he is expounding the true, proper, or correct meaning of the words in question, and the reader gets the impression that he is being given arbitrary and unsought directions on how he ought to use them. The belief in a ' logical geography ' of concepts, capable of being accurately mapped out by reference to the ordinary uses of language, with appeals to ' correctness ', ' dominance ', etc., seems to originate, in part at least, from this desire to use a precise terminology without employing explicitly technical terms ; the assumption being that the necessary rules and regulations are *already* embodied in ordinary parlance, requiring only inspection, or the production of a few trivial examples, to make clear what is allowable and what is not.[9]

Granted, as I hope it may be, that there is no general warrant for this assumption, or for the preposterous restrictions upon free speech which its acceptance would entail, it may still be felt unreasonable to maintain that it is impossible to misuse language, and that apart from its technical employment it is subject to no rules at all. To hold that all words are inherently vague, and that grammar represents a merely social adjustment of the otherwise untrammelled possibilities of combination amongst them, is likewise a paradox, and one which, by threatening to abolish the boundaries of sense and nonsense, merely compels us to redraw, within the postulated flux, the moderately restrictive limits which we do normally observe. So much may, I think, be urged in mitigation of the position lately adopted by Mr. Haas,[10] in holding that in what he calls their expressive use, the potential range of meaning of words is infinite. It seems to be more in line with the facts to admit that in practice there *are* restrictions, limits to transgression, even where the use of language is almost purely expressive. But they are *a posteriori*, and cannot be laid down or legislated for in advance, since they depend on which words are used, and the context, verbal *and* social, in which they occur. Thus, in poetry, one may be prepared to tolerate a good deal, but there comes a point at which a line or a poem becomes merely a concatenation of words chosen at random. Similarly, with the more rhapsodic kinds of philosophical prose, there comes a point at which you can get nothing out of the stuff, and begin to suspect that you are being imposed upon. That is the time to start calling upon such epithets as ' meaningless ' and ' nonsense ',—terms of judgement, be it noted, which are much abused in being applied by rote, and hastily invoked whenever

[9]Cf. Baier, art. cit.

[10]' On Speaking a Language ', in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* 1950-51 ; a paper to which my obligations are many and manifest,

somebody slips on some minor, and usually fictitious, linguistic banana-skin.[11]

Mr. Haas's valuable distinction between terminology and expression, between bond and free in the use of language, is, as he admits, an abstract one, since for most purposes it is customary to employ a mixture of the two. Philosophers, in particular, disport themselves mainly in the no-man's-land between these regions of discourse, so that unless there is a declared intention to abide by some particular set of regulations, accusations of impropriety cannot be sustained, except in the grossest cases. There is, admittedly, a sort of common-law stability and exactness attaching to *some* terms in ordinary use, for instance, the names of familiar objects,—and to that extent they approximate to the statutory requirements of a terminology. Thus, when ' Beachcomber ' finds it necessary to announce : ' In my article on Milk Production yesterday, for " horse " read " cow " throughout ', it is obvious to everybody that there has been a hideous mistake. But phil-osophers do not commonly drop that kind of brick. *Their* terms, the mental-conduct verbs, for example, belong in a meteorological rather than a geographical setting, and operate within much wider tolerances,—*ex officio*, one might say, for if they were uniformly clear and distinct they would have little claim on the notice of philosophers.

Attempts to chart such a region are therefore unusually difficult ; in the absence of an established technical vocabulary, they can hardly proceed otherwise than by borrowing the more appropriate informal terms and treating them rigorously. There can be no occasion to complain of this, in principle,—but the temptation to father the result upon the man-in-the-street is one which ought to be resisted. Appeals to ' correct ' language, in this context, must always be disguised definitions, having no unanimous support from ordinary usage, because such usage is just not sufficiently established to be able to decide what is correct and what is not. The same applies to Professor Ryle's *reductio ad absurdum* method of constructing allegedly impossible locutions to exhibit type-distinctions, and to show up type-mistakes. They are just not sufficiently absurd. Given a terminology, as in the case of the Sense-Datum Theory, it is possible and legitimate to point, as Professor Ryle does, to confusion, incorrectness and self-contra-diction in the use made of it, either by its inventors or by those who, in adopting the jargon, commit themselves to the conventions it entails. But to issue general decrees for the governance of a range of expressions in common use is another matter ; Mrs. Partington's efforts to control the Atlantic would promise well by comparison. For whatever usages be laid down as correct, it is nearly always possible to produce counter-examples of an unimpeachable ordinariness and legitimacy. Nor is it by any means in order, as Mr. Hampshire has emphasised,[12] to dismiss these as corruptions

[11]One is reminded of the prosaic gentleman (was it Babbage ?) who sought to put Tennyson right on the Population Question :
' Every moment dies a man,
Every moment *one and one-sixteenth* is born '.
[12]In his review of *The Concept of Mind* (*Mind*, LIX, 234).

introduced by philosophers. For apart from the fact that philosophers have no such influence, baneful or otherwise, upon vulgar parlance, the very fact that these ' illegitimate ' locutions have taken root there means that they are part of the standard to which appeal is being made. If it is a corrupted standard, such appeals are either valueless or not *bona fide*, since they evidently involve undisclosed principles of selection, namely the very theory which the favoured locutions are supposed, independently, to endorse. Where, as in Professor Ryle's case, the theory is not, perhaps, one which commends itself as obvious to commonsense, it is inevitable that language should let him down in places. To give but one example, he states, in a recent article,[13] that ' it is not easy or difficult to believe things '. It seems fair to reply that this is itself *extremely* difficult to believe. Not that that does anything to refute Professor Ryle's point, that believing, in *his* preferred sense, is dispositional. But it brings out the fact that language recognises other senses, such as that of assenting, which are equally legitimate, and closely related. Indeed, at the risk of seeming to countenance obscurity for its own sake, I am inclined to think that the whole business of distinguishing ' senses ' of words in this connection is perhaps misguided. Many of them have an almost intentional vagueness and ambiguity of reference, which, if evaporated under analysis, deprives them of their essential content, and leaves the world looking tidier but less recognisable than before. To select one sense as dominant is, as we have seen, to perform covertly a technical delimitation of ' proper ' meaning, so as to fit the term in question into a pre-ordained scheme. There is nothing to stop anyone doing this, so long as there is no attempt to palm off the definition as a necessary one,—as the only one sanctioned by ' ordinary ' or ' correct ' usage. Then, I should say, there *is* a legitimate appeal to ordinary language. To those who proclaim that ' We don't say this ' or ' We do say that ', it is proper to reply : ' Oh yes we do ' or ' Yes, but we also say . . .'. General linguistic ordinances can be rebutted by reference to ordinary language ; they cannot be safely erected upon it.

<div align="center">*   *   *   *   *   *</div>

My main object, in the foregoing, has been to give reasons for dissenting from the opinion that there are ' correct ' forms of language in any sense which is philosophically useful or interesting, and more particularly, to discountenance the idea that ' ordinary language ', in the prevailingly vague acceptance of that term, has anything to offer in the way of authoritative guidance in this connection. The discussion has centred on the use and meaning of individual terms, but I have no doubt that similar considerations could be shown to apply in the case of syntactical structure as well. Supposing this is so, what is left of the contention with which we began, namely that philosophical problems, paradoxes and errors in general, all originate at the point of departure from ordinary language ? Not very much, perhaps,

---

[13]' Feelings ', in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, April, 1951.

in so far as most of the specific arguments to this effect start off by assuming that ordinary language *is* the standard of correctness. Even if this be allowed for the moment, such arguments are not particularly convincing. Their chief begettor has been Mr. Norman Malcolm,[14] and his views have met with so many criticisms from so many quarters,[15] that it would be tedious to recount their details, and difficult, if not superfluous, to add to their number. Mr. Malcolm himself has lately declined to defend the earliest statement of his position, though it does not yet appear how far he has actually vacated it *in toto*. In this situation, any criticism of Mr. Malcolm's published opinions may well prove to be obsolete ; so what follows had best be regarded simply as a retrospect of some points in the earlier stages of the controversy, which seem to bear upon what has been said already.

Mr. Malcolm has endeavoured to state the argument from ordinary language in such a way that it can be used against *any* undomesticated utterance on the part of philosophers. In doing so he is, on his own showing, generalising upon a procedure employed by Professor G. E. Moore in his famous, if somewhat mystifying argument against Scepticism in ' The Defence of Common Sense ' and ' Proof of an External World '.[16] Mr. Malcolm interprets the notion of ordinary language in such a way as to entail that philosophical statements, however plainly expressed, *must* turn out to be either false, illiterate, futile, or senseless. It is therefore, as he recognises, an *a priori* proof of our original thesis. The method is as follows : An expression, he says, is an ordinary expression if it has a commonly accepted use,—not that it is necessarily in frequent use, but that it is such as *would* be used to describe a certain sort of situation, if it arose. Ordinary language is correct language,—that is, a situation is correctly described if it is described in ordinary language, and *not otherwise*, (this point is essential to the entire argument). Philosophers' expressions are not ordinary—*ex hypothesi*, for if they were they would be commonplaces without philosophic interest. What is characteristic of such expressions, therefore, is that they ' go against ordinary language '. They allege, for instance, that no line is really straight, that no empirical statements are absolutely certain, and so on. Now if such statements are to be taken as literal and factual, they are either false, (i.e. contradict the ordinary statements which do have descriptive use in the situation), or else they are incorrect, (i.e. refer to or describe the situation after a fashion, but only by grossly misusing the ordinary terms they employ). If they are not factual, then the only alternatives open to the philosopher

---

[14]' Moore and Ordinary Language ', in *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore* (Evanston, 1942) ; ' Defending Common Sense ', in *The Philosophical Review*, May, 1949 ; and ' Philosophy for Philosophers ', *ibid.* July, 1951. The latter appeared after the present paper was written and is not discussed here.

[15]e.g. C. A. Campbell, ' Common-sense Propositions and Philosophical Paradoxes ' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1944-5 ; Max Black, ' On Speaking with the Vulgar ', in *The Philosophical Review*, November, 1949 ; J. L. Cobitz, ' The Appeal to Ordinary Language ', in *Analysis*, October, 1950 ; C. D. Rollins, ' Ordinary Language and Procrustean Beds ', in *Mind*, LX, 238, April, 1951 ; R. M. Chisholm, ' Philosophy and Ordinary Language ', in *The Philosophical Review*, July, 1951.

[16]In *Contemporary British Philosophy* (1925), and *Proceedings of the British Academy* (1939).

who makes them are to admit that they are disguised terminological pro-
posals, or else that they are moonshine. As linguistic proposals they are, to
say the least, pointless, since they obliterate distinctions which it would at
once be necessary to restore, e.g. between the evidently crooked and the
apparently straight ; as moonshine they are, of course, negligible anyway.
The effect of this is that philosophers who deny the imputation that their
statements are meaningless or merely verbal, and who wish to be understood
as saying something about facts which is not (as Moore seems to have sup-
posed) just literally and obviously false, are automatically convicting them-
selves under Section Two. They can only be misusing ordinary language,
and talking about what is obvious to everybody in a grotesque and illegit-
imate way. Indeed, whatever category they ultimately fall into, they get
there in the first place by going against ordinary language, thereby implying
that its expressions are false, or improper, or self-contradictory ; which is
itself a false, improper and self-contradictory thing to say.

To see through this argument, it is only necessary to consider how the
terms ' ordinary expression ' and ' correct ' are used in it. What follows,
in the first place, from the definition of an ordinary expression as one having
an accepted descriptive use ? If we take ' expression ' here to mean ' sen-
tence ', the statement does no more than equate ' ordinary expression ' with
' verifiable (or falsifiable) sentence ', thereby creating the not very plausible
impression that the plain man is a verificationist, and, equally naively, that
his use of language is invariably descriptive. If under ' expression ', we
include words and phrases occurring *in* sentences, all we do then is to restrict
the ' ordinary ' vocabulary to descriptive terms and predicates ; but as
Mr. Malcolm is aware, this will not by itself be sufficient to prevent plain-
speaking philosophers (such as Russell) from uttering the sort of sentence
he wishes to exclude. For so long as their individual expressions are ' ord-
inary ', and so long as they do not depart from grammatical orthodoxy,
there will be nothing extraordinary in the actual sentence as it stands, but
only in what it purports to say. So we must conclude that Mr. Malcolm
really wishes ' ordinary expression ' to stand for ' verifiable sentence ', i.e.
a sentence with a certain sort of *meaning*, not a sentence of any particular
linguistic form.

For full correctness, the sentence must also have an accepted use and
this means, I imagine, that it is the sort of sentence which all or most people
would make use of when confronted with the situation in question. This,
if it is not completely vague, is to introduce the objectionable supposition
referred to earlier, that to any thing or class of things, situation or class of
situations, there corresponds one, or at most a limited number of assignable
formulae appropriate thereto, and equally, that any given expression is
predetermined in respect of the range of situations to which it can properly
be applied. Needless to say, no method is given for deciding what would
or would not be said in any given situation, nor for predicting that a situation
could not arise which might justify the use of almost any given expression

you please.[17]   (I add ' almost ', to allow for the case of self-contradictory, or (possibly) type-transgressing expressions,—but even about these there are questions to be raised and qualms to be had ;   for some such expressions, as Mr. Malcolm points out, do have accepted uses).   In default of any further explanation, one can only suppose that, here as elsewhere, Mr. Malcolm is relying upon his ' sense of linguistic propriety ' to tell him what would be an ' accepted ' use, and what not.

However, the main objection to all this is that, despite appearances, we are not being given any information about *language*, as such, at all. No grammatical or other linguistic criterion has been introduced to distinguish sense from nonsense, or philosophical utterances from any other kind :   for ' verifiable sentence ' is clearly not a grammatical or linguistic category.   All that Mr. Malcolm shows is that philosophical utterances go against ordinary language in that they do not say exactly what common sense would say ;   like Professor Moore, he gives the impression that they are intended to *contradict* common sense, but this, as Professor Campbell has pointed out,[18] is a gratuitous assumption, since they may be intended to amplify it, or to place emphasis on points which are commonly neglected, but not commonly denied.   Nevertheless, by employing terms such as ' incorrect ', ' misuse ' and so on to express the way in which such utterances differ, in so far as they appear paradoxical, from commonplace ones, Mr. Malcolm contrives to suggest that they violate language in exhibiting grammatical deformities, or an illiterate use of terms.   Besides invoking the groundless normative conception of language already referred to, this description is plainly a mere polemical device, whose partiality becomes quite obvious when we consider other cases—poetical expressions, for instance, or statements to the effect that the soul is immortal, or the will free ;   these are certainly not ' ordinary ' in Mr. Malcolm's sense, but only the slave of a theory would be equal to describing them as ' incorrect ', as ' going against ordinary language ', or as ' deviations from Standard English '.   The additional equivocation by which Mr. Malcolm slides from ' incorrect ' to ' senseless ' (i.e. having no established descriptive use) is almost too obvious to be worth mention, except to show the parallel with the more inadvertent example provided earlier by Mr. Toulmin.

If proof of the essential perversity of Mr. Malcolm's procedure be needed, he has himself supplied it, in offering to return this technique upon its own chief inventor.   For he has argued that Professor Moore's insistence upon sticking to the ' ordinary ' use of the word ' know ', as applied to empirical propositions, is so far from defending this use as to constitute an ' enormous departure ' from ordinary language.   For when Professor Moore held up his hand to the British Academy and declared that he *knew* it was a hand, and so forth, he was doing so, according to Mr. Malcolm, in an artificial and theatrical context, where nobody, least of all Professor Moore, had

[17]Cf. Dr. Waismann's stress upon the ' open texture ' of empirical concepts ;   in ' Verifiability ', Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume XIX, (reprinted in Flew, op.cit.).

[18]C. A. Campbell, art. cit,

any real doubts about the matter. (Philosophic doubts which may have been felt on that occasion are not real doubts, and so do not count). Now since, in Mr. Malcolm's opinion, the correct and ordinary use of the word ' know ' applies only in situations where there has been a genuine (e.g. perceptual) doubt, with subsequent conviction, after reasons or other evidence shown, it follows that the use of ' know ' which Professor Moore was defending was non-ordinary, and therefore as incorrect and senseless as the one he attacked. From so arch an enemy of paradox, this has been too much to bear, and it has rained rejoinders ever since. Mr. Malcolm deserves them all ; he is hoist with his own petard, for by this argument, *all* use, even of ordinary language, in a philosophical context, would appear to be at least as artificial as Professor Moore's, which did, after all, involve a quasi-descriptive paradigm-situation. Mr. Malcolm, who retails a number of anecdotes to illustrate what *he* conceives to be the ' proper ' use of ' know ', is himself guilty of using it ' incorrectly ', since he, no less than Professor Moore, is talking about the *use* of the word, not employing it in a genuine context. Moreover, if, as Mr. Malcolm might allow, the type of argument here employed by him against Professor Moore is parallel to that used by Professor Moore himself against the sceptic, the odd conclusion follows, that if Mr. Malcolm is right, Professor Moore is wrong ; if (as I suspect), he is wrong, then Professor Moore is still wrong—for they use the same argument. Contrariwise, if Professor Moore is right, Mr. Malcolm must be wrong in denying it, whereas if Professor Moore is wrong, Mr. Malcolm must again be wrong, for his argument is certainly no better than Professor Moore's. What this proves, I do not profess to know, unless it be that those who appeal to ordinary language are likely to perish by it in the long run.

* * * * * *

A final disclaimer : in railing thus against the prophets of a new linguistic dispensation, I would not dispute that attention to language, and care in its use, are not of the utmost importance in philosophy. More, I should agree that the many obscure pressures and obstacles which one encounters in everyday commerce with language are undeniable, interesting, and possibly significant. My point is merely that, failing a systematic study of these pecularities, there is no profit in treating them as a campaign-platform in the propagation of some philosophical theory. Such a study would be most unlikely to endorse any one theory beyond all others as the ' natural metaphysic '—or anti-metaphysic, embodied in language ; and it certainly should not be undertaken with that idea in mind.

P. L. HEATH

University of Edinburgh.

LINKED CITATIONS
- Page 1 of 1 -

[Footnotes]

[3] **Are Philosophical Theses Relative to Language?**
L. Jonathan Cohen
Analysis, Vol. 9, No. 5. (Apr., 1949), pp. 72-77.
Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0003-2638%28194904%299%3A5%3C72%3AAPTRTL%3E2.0.CO%3B2-8

[15] **The Appeal to Ordinary Language**
J. L. Cobitz
Analysis, Vol. 11, No. 1. (Oct., 1950), pp. 9-11.
Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0003-2638%28195010%2911%3A1%3C9%3ATATOL%3E2.0.CO%3B2-A

[15] **Ordinary Language and Procrustean Beds**
C. D. Rollins
Mind, New Series, Vol. 60, No. 238. (Apr., 1951), pp. 223-232.
Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0026-4423%28195104%292%3A60%3A238%3C223%3AOLAPB%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E

[15] **Philosophers and Ordinary Language**
Roderick M. Chisholm
The Philosophical Review, Vol. 60, No. 3. (Jul., 1951), pp. 317-328.
Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-8108%28195107%2960%3A3%3C317%3APAOL%3E2.0.CO%3B2-G