What can we learn about language from thinking about philosophy?[1]

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There are at least two ways in which we might assess how our understanding of language has been influenced by contemporary philosophy. The most obvious way is by the direct influence of philosophical theories of language, where here I use 'theories of language' so as to include any theory describing some aspect of language, its use or acquisition. The work of Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, Tarski, Saussure, Chomsky, Davidson, Grice, and Kripke—to cite only some of the most notable examples—has certainly had a great (and perhaps even in some cases positive) influence on the way in which philosophers think about language.

A survey and philosophical critique of the important work in the philosophy of language would answer to the title of this essay, but that is not what I intend to do here. First,

such a project would really require a book length treatment. Second, developments within the philosophy of language itself are not the only way in which philosophy can contribute to our understanding of language. We can also learn something about language by looking at the role it plays within philosophy—in philosophical inquiry and argumentation. In coming to better understand the role of language in philosophy we come not only to a better understanding of what we do as philosophers, but also to a better understanding of a particularly interesting and important aspect of language itself. My goal in this paper is to investigate this role. My strategy for pursuing this goal will be to focus on explicating the role of *paraphrase* in philosophy.

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

As a preliminary description of the role of paraphrase, we may say that when a philosopher offers a paraphrase *p* of some formulation *f*, she is informing her audience that, for philosophical purposes, she is willing to forsake the use of *f* in favour of *p*—that for her purposes *p* is just as good as or better than *f*. This preliminary description has a substantial hole in it: what does it mean for one expression to be, for philosophical purposes, better than another? It will be one of the goals of this paper to answer this question. A good first step towards an answer can be taken by considering an example.

Parmenides, looking for trouble, asked how it could be true that Pegasus does not exist unless it is true *of* Pegasus that he doesn't exist. Furthermore, how could it be true *of* Pegasus that he doesn't exist unless he, paradoxically, *is*? The tradition, not sure what to say, for the most part avoided answering the question—or acquiesced, with Meinong being perhaps the most famous, or infamous, follower of Parmenides in these matters. However, in the 20th century Lord Russell, with the help of modern logic and his descriptive theory of names, showed us what was wrong with the Parmenidean argument. The reasoning, he explained, was flawed. The truth of 'Pegasus does not exist'

does not paradoxically presuppose or entail the existence of Pegasus. To say that Pegasus does not exist is not to predicate of Pegasus the dubious property of non-existence. Rather, it is to make a quantificational claim: to say that it is not the case that there is anything that has the property of being Pegasus—in other words, that no thing is Pegasus. Seek, and ye shall *not* find.[2]

The availability of this paraphrase allowed Russell to rid himself of the need to countenance paradoxical beings that *are* but do not *exist*. Crucial to Russell's argument is the claim that his paraphrase, 'no thing is Pegasus', is superior to Parmenides', 'it is true of Pegasus that he doesn't exist'. Since it might unreflectively seem that these are just two different ways of saying the same thing, where does the superiority of the Russell paraphrase lie? In a sense the answer is obvious: the Russell paraphrase succeeds in expressing what we mean to say when we deny that Pegasus exists without in any way seeming to presuppose or imply that Pegasus *is*.

This example gives us enough of a grip on the notion of paraphrase to put a little meat on the bones of our preliminary description of its role. For a particular philosopher in a particular dialectical context, one way in which a formulation may be better than another is by allowing her to say what she wants to say without seeming to presuppose or imply anything she does not want to presuppose or imply. In the above example the Russell paraphrase is better than Parmenides' in virtue of allowing Russell to say just what he wants to say—in this case, that Pegasus does not exist—without seeming to presuppose or imply anything that he does not want to presuppose or imply—in this case, that Pegasus *is*.

Further fleshing out this preliminary description will be one of the goals of the next two sections. In Section Two I will attempt to further motivate the claim—both historical and normative—that paraphrase has an important

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[2] It is worth mentioning that according to the descriptive theory of names which Russell adhered to the property of being Pegasus is the property of being a winged, etc., horse.

philosophical role, and in Section Three I will examine the role of paraphrase in philosophy as described by several authors. In Section Four I will try to further illuminate the role of paraphrase by discussing some recent examples of how paraphrase has been used. Finally, in the last section of the paper I will tentatively attempt to extrapolate some of the linguistic presuppositions of the conception of philosophy presented in the first four sections.

SECTION TWO: WHY PARAPHRASE?

Essential to Russell's untangling of the Parmenidean line of reasoning was the development of modern logic and semantics.[3] Refusing to accept Parmenides' conclusion is easy—it is showing what is wrong with his argument that had proved so difficult for Russell's predecessors. The tools provided by modern logic and semantics are very helpful in this regard. By making use of the regimented language of symbolic logic, we can formulate a denial of Pegasus' existence that has just the logical properties that we think a denial of Pegasus' existence *should* have—in particular, one which does *not* have as a consequence that Pegasus *is*. Furthermore, we can say something more substantial about what is wrong with Parmenides' formulation: not only does it have unwanted and unintuitive apparent consequences, but it treats a quantificational claim as if it were a predicative one.

As we have seen, Russell's particular solution to the problem of non-being relied on contemporary developments in logic and semantics. But the general kind of problem he solved—the problem of resolving apparent tensions in one's beliefs—has always played an important role in philosophy. In Plato's dialogues, for example, we often see Socrates engaging in just such an activity with his interlocutors. What is not ubiquitous in the tradition is the attempt to deal with such problems on an explicitly linguistic plane. But this is not so much a change in *subject* as a change in *strategy*. It is

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[3] I suppose different people might use the phrase "modern logic and semantics" differently. I mean, roughly, logic and semantics in the tradition of Frege.

often possible to translate problems about the world into problems about words using a technique Quine called "semantic ascent". The classic account of semantic ascent appears in *Word and Object*:

> Semantic ascent, as I speak of it, applies anywhere. 'There are wombats in Tasmania' might be paraphrased as "Wombat' is true of some creatures in Tasmania,' if there were any point in it. But it does happen that semantic ascent is more useful in philosophical connections than in most, and I think I can explain why...The strategy of semantic ascent is that it carries the discussion into a domain where both parties are better agreed on the objects (viz., words) and on the main terms concerning them. Words, or their inscriptions, unlike points, miles, classes, and the rest, are tangible objects of the size so popular in the marketplace, where men of unlike conceptual schemes communicate at their best. The strategy is one of ascending to a common part of two fundamentally disparate conceptual schemes, the better to discuss disparate foundations. No wonder it helps in philosophy.[4]

The reason that the strategy of semantic ascent is an effective one is that statements about, say, God can often be paraphrased into statements about the term 'God', and conversely. To discover that 'God' does not denote anything would be to discover that God does not exist. To conclude that the existence of evil is incompatible with the existence of God is to conclude that 'Evil exists' entails 'God does not exist', at least given some innocuous auxiliary premises.

While these toy examples are of limited interest, the strategy of semantic ascent is not. The above mentioned advancements in logic and semantics make it possible to formulate sentences, using the regimented language of logic, whose truth conditions and logical relations to other sentences are unprecedentedly precise and clear. Once we

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[4] Willard van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 271-2; quoted in Richard Rorty, "Metaphilosophical Difficulties of Linguistic Philosophy" in *The Linguistic Turn* ed. Richard Rorty (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 11, which has helpful discussions of many of the ideas that appear in this paper.

have formulated a claim in such a way, there is often precious little of philosophical interest about the claim that is left opaque to us.[5] In our above example, for instance, it is clear that '~∃(x)P(x)' does *not* presuppose, imply, or in any other way have as a consequence that the property of being Pegasus must apply to something.

The ability to formulate claims using such regimented language is a significant boon to philosophy as a social enterprise, for it makes it possible to formulate claims for communicative purposes that have drastically better understood truth-conditions than claims not expressed using regimented language. It is also a significant boon to philosophy as a personal exercise: in trying to so formulate the claims we would like to make, we often discover hidden ambiguities in our thought—or worse: real confusion lurking beneath the surface.

Despite these apparent benefits, one might worry that since the very purpose of paraphrasing a sentence into regimented language is to make explicit the truth conditions and logical import of what one is asserting, such paraphrases achieve nothing: any debate about the truth-conditions or the logical status of a claim expressed in ordinary language will be transformed into a debate about the proper translation of it into regimented language. This point is well taken. However, such transformations do serve a very important purpose: instead of a seemingly frictionless and endless debate about the status of the original claim, both parties are now invited to produce paraphrases of that claim in the regimented language. But an important constraint on such paraphrases is that they must *work*: the paraphrase in the regimented language must possess the agreed upon logical and semantic properties of the original claim. What may come as a surprise is that in many cases this constraint provides a tangible increase in friction: it can be unexpectedly difficult to find paraphrases that work in this sense. Failing to find an adequate paraphrase does not mean, of course, that there is none to be found. But if enough time

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[5] Except, of course, whether or not it is true. Unfortunately I do not have any clever suggestions for how to figure out *that*.

is spent searching to no avail, the lack of such a paraphrase becomes the most probable explanation for why we cannot find one. This in turn reduces the number of live theories about the logical and semantic properties of the original claim.

In the 20th Century, for example, the failure of phenomenalists to find phenomenalistically acceptable paraphrases of our best scientific theories proved to be the death of phenomenalism.[6] The failure of nominalists to find nominalistically acceptable paraphrases of our best theories has likewise been the demise of strict forms of nominalism. Arch materialist-cum-naturalist-cum-empiricists such as Quine and David Lewis, for example, have felt compelled by this failure to accept the existence of paradigmatically non-material objects such as sets. In Section Four I will discuss an example of this kind in detail.

SECTION THREE: THE ROLE OF PARAPHRASE IN PHILOSOPHY

In Section Two we saw the value of the strategy of semantic ascent—in particular, we saw how following that strategy transforms various paradigmatically philosophical questions, questions about the truth-conditions of various claims, into questions about how best to paraphrase them. But what if we do *not* choose to make use of the strategy of semantic ascent in our philosophizing—what role, if any, does paraphrase have to play then? If we accept the legitimacy of semantic ascent, we must think there is such a role: the idea behind semantic ascent is that certain claims about words correspond or are equivalent to claims about the world. The question then remains: to what in philosophy as traditionally conceived does paraphrase correspond with?

To answer this question we need to think about what the traditional conception of philosophy is. To this end, we will consider descriptions of the nature of philosophy made by Nicholas Rescher, Robert Nozick, and Roderick Chisholm.

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[6] By this I mean only that an analytic philosopher may presuppose the falsity of phenomenalism in her work without limiting her audience in any significant way.

What is interesting about the three statements is that despite their differences, the conceptions of philosophy they express are essentially the same. Indeed, they might be thought of as three different ways of fleshing out Hegel's unusually clear and concise remark that philosophy is "thinking things over".[7] The underlying unity of the three accounts is important for our purposes because the notion of paraphrase is explicitly mentioned only in Chisholm's description. If, however, Chisholm is right about the importance of paraphrase for the kind of project he describes, and if the three statements in fact express the *same* conception of philosophy, then it follows that paraphrase will be important for the project described by all three of them, even if Rescher and Nozick do not mention it in their descriptions. We will begin with Rescher's description:

> Philosophy roots in contradiction—in conflicting beliefs…The impetus to philosophizing arises when we step back to look critically at what we know (or think we know) about the world and try to make sense of it. We want an account that can optimally accommodate the data—recognizing that it cannot, in the end, accept them all at face value.
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> The key task of philosophy is thus to impart systemic order into the domain of relevant data; to render them coherent and, above all, consistent…We become involved in philosophy in our endeavor to make systemic sense of the extraphilosophical "facts"—when we try to answer those big questions by systematizing what we think we know about the world, pushing our "knowledge" to its ultimate conclusions and combining items usually kept in convenient separation. Philosophy is the policeman of thought, as it were, the agent for maintaining law and order in our cognitive endeavors.
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> The question "Should we philosophize?" accordingly obtains a straightforward answer. The impetus to philosophy lies in our very nature as rational inquirers: as

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[7] Alvin Plantinga brought this remark of Hegel's to my attention.

beings who have questions, demand answers, and want these answers to be cogent ones.[8]

Along similar lines, Nozick claims that:

Many philosophical problems are ones of understanding how something is or can be possible. How is it possible for us to have free will, supposing that all actions are causally determined? Randomness, also, seems no more congenial…How is it possible that we know anything, given the facts the skeptic enumerates…How is it possible that motion occurs, given Zeno's arguments? How is it possible for something to be the same thing from one time to another, through change?…how is evil possible, supposing the existence of an omnipotent omniscient good God?…

The form of these questions is: how is one thing possible, given (or supposing) certain other things? Some statements $r_1, \ldots, r_n$ are assumed or accepted or taken for granted, and there is a tension between these statements and another statement p; they appear to exclude p's holding true. Let us term the r_i apparent excluders (of p). Since the statement p also is accepted, we face the question of how p is possible, given its apparent excluders.[9]

And finally, Chisholm writes:

One kind of [philosophical] puzzlement arises when we have an apparent conflict of intuitions. If we are philosophers, we then try to show that the apparent conflict of intuitions is only an apparent conflict and not a real one. If we fail, we may have to say that what we took to be an apparent conflict of intuitions was in fact a conflict of apparent intuitions, and then we must decide which of the conflicting intuitions is only an apparent intuition. But if we succeed, then both the intuitions will be preserved. Since there was an apparent conflict, we will have to conclude that the formulation of at least one of the

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[8] Nicholas Rescher, *The Strife of Systems* (University of Pittsburgh Press: Pittsburgh, 1985), 20-1.
[9] Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Belnap: Harvard: Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 8-9.

intuitions was defective. And though the formulation may be imbedded in our ordinary language, we will have to say that, strictly and philosophically, a different formulation is to be preferred. But to make it clear that we are not rejecting the intuition that we are reformulating, we must show systematically how to interpret the ordinary formulation into the philosophical one. The extent to which we can show this will be one mark of our success in dealing with the philosophical puzzle. Another will be the extent to which our proposed solution contributes to the solution of still other philosophical puzzles.[10]

According to these authors, an important part of what we do as philosophers is to seek the reconciliation of what appear to be conflicting truths—although none of our three philosophers puts things quite that way. Nozick prefers to speak of explaining the compossibility of various statements we accept, and Rescher describes philosophy as the systematization of our beliefs or apparent knowledge. These are nonetheless just different ways of talking about the reconciliation of what appear to us to be conflicting truths. We should understand Chisholm along these lines as well.

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[10] Roderick M. Chisholm, *Person and Object* (Open Court, 1976), 15. The qualification in the second sentence of this quotation is of note: *if we are philosophers*, we try to resolve any apparent conflicts of intuition. Although not directly related to the subject of paraphrase, this qualification is certainly of methodological significance. What is its purpose? What if we were *not* philosophers? Chisholm seems to be implying that if we are philosophers we will not simply abandon the weakest of our intuitions or decide to simply live with the tension. Think of his claim this way: it is a stricture against unnecessary agnosticism. If we are philosophers, we seek understanding. Understanding can be lacking because our beliefs do not seem to fit together in the right way: because there is an apparent conflict between them. But understanding can be lacking in other ways as well—a rock or a beetle might have no beliefs in tension, yet still lack understanding. Understanding, in short, can be lacking because of a lack of (true) beliefs. The philosopher who seeks understanding wishes to have a wide variety of true beliefs, which she can see fit together in the right way. We can see this same point being made, in slightly more grandiose language, at the end of the Rescher quotation.

Chisholm's use of 'intuitions' refers to true claims that we are, upon reflection, strongly inclined to believe. That is why he claims that if there is a *real* conflict between apparent intuitions at most one of them can be a *real* intuition—because anything that is really an intuition is *true*. So if there is a real conflict, one or more of the apparent intuitions must be a *merely* apparent intuition, something that *appears* to be an intuition, but is not. This should make it clear that Chisholm's description of philosophy does not make any illicit use of the notion of intuition: the type of philosophical activity he describes can be adequately described, and essentially *is* so described by Rescher and Nozick, without making use of the term 'intuition'. An apparent conflict of intuitions is nothing more than an apparent conflict of truths. It follows that if the conflict is real the "truths" must not be—at least one of them must be a merely apparent truth, a falsehood that appears to be true. However, because Chisholm speaks of intuitions, and because we will be referencing Chisholm later in this paper, I will slide back and forth between the terminology of intuitions that he uses and the talk of (things we reflectively take to be) truths that we may take Chisholm's intuition talk to be shorthand for. This should not, I trust, cause any confusion.

In any case, there are two possible outcomes to the kind of reconciliation project described above: success and failure. If we succeed, the apparently conflicting truths turn out to be real truths that only apparently conflict. In this case it is the way we *formulate* our beliefs, and not the *content* of the beliefs themselves, that is the cause of the apparent inconsistency.[11]

Historical examples of successful reconciliations might include the resolution of Kant's dynamical antinomies,

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[11] A possibility that I am ignoring in this paper is that one or more of the beliefs involved in the apparent conflict of intuitions is false, but nonetheless the tension is a mere artifact of the formulation of one or more of those beliefs. In this case there could be a successful reconciliation but not success as I define it above: it simply does not follow from the fact that we have resolved an apparent tension between our beliefs that those beliefs are true.

certain of Zeno's paradoxes, or, according to compatibilists, certain apparent problems about free will. Exegetical examples abound: Kantians, for example, argue that various sentences Kant wrote can be reconciled—that despite their apparent inconsistency, they are, in fact consistent. Kant's philosophical opponents, however, argue that that project has a different outcome.

This other outcome is, of course, failure—what we had hoped were merely apparently conflicting actual truths turn out to be actually conflicting merely apparent truths. In this case it is the *content* of our thoughts, and not their formulations, that turns out to be defective. Kant's mathematical antinomies are a historical example here. According to incompatibilists, this is the case with certain problems about free will—there is a *real* conflict, and we are either wrong about being determined or wrong about having free will.

So we see that paraphrase plays an essential role in determining whether an attempted reconciliation succeeds or fails. A re-formulation, after all, is just a particular kind of paraphrase. If a paraphrase of an intuition can be found that is not in any apparent conflict with our other intuitions, we have succeeded in reconciling the apparent conflict. If such a re-formulation cannot be found, we fail. But it is not always clear whether or not a given paraphrase expresses the target intuition, rather than merely something close to it.

At this point, it is perhaps worth mentioning a few of the different ways philosophers have thought about what precisely it is that a successful paraphrase is supposed to do. A paraphrase is supposed to be meaning preserving, in some sense of that problematic term. Accordingly, the qualities a successful paraphrase must share with the statement it paraphrases have been variously proposed to include: (1) propositional content; (2) cognitive content; (3) factual content—meaning that a successful paraphrase describes the same fact as the original; (4) scientific content—meaning that the paraphrase is just as good as the original for making predictions and formulating explanations; (5) informational content; (6) conceptual or inferential role; (7) truth

conditions; (8) assertion conditions; or (9) logical properties.[12]

Whatever qualities a successful paraphrase must share with the formulation it is a paraphrase of, an important qualification is that a successful paraphrase preserves only those properties of the original statement that the philosopher who is offering the paraphrase *desires* her statement to have: if her paraphrase shared the *un*desirable qualities of her original formulation it would not in any significant sense be *better* than it. What is important is being able to say precisely what we want or need to say. Sometimes upon reflection we will judge that in using our original formulation we were saying *more* than what we really wanted or needed to say. What a successful paraphrase preserves— or rather in this case *reveals*—is what we, upon reflection, think is the truth we were trying to express using the original formulation.[13] What we are *un*reflectively inclined to say should have no hold on us. As Quine notes, "Reflective persons unswayed by wishful thinking can themselves now and again have cause to wonder what, if anything, they are talking about."[14]

These considerations make judgments of success or failure in reconciliation attempts a messy business. Even in judgements about our own case, the line between revising what we think and finding a better way of putting it may be vague and obscure to us. Nonetheless, such judgements can make all the difference in the world. Often, the success or failure of a paraphrase project is of existential importance. For example, whether Berkeleyan idealism is a form of radical skepticism—in the sense that it entails the *falsehood* of the vast majority of human belief—depends on whether

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[12] I am claiming neither that this list is exhaustive, nor that all the numbered categories represent distinct concepts, nor even that each of the entries refers to a concept that may be coherently applied to sentences at all. I am just reporting what has been thought.

[13] Of course we might, upon reflection, decide that *there is* no such truth.

[14] Quine, 242.

statements about cabbages and kings can be successfully paraphrased by statements that assert or imply the existence of nothing other than minds and their ideas. Whether Kantian transcendental idealism is such a form of radical skepticism depends on whether statements about cabbages and kings can be successfully paraphrased by statements that make reference to only aspects of the phenomenal world. Whether Spinoza's monism is such a form of radical skepticism depends on whether statements about cabbages and kings can be successfully paraphrase by statements making reference only to the One and its modes. And so it is with Leibniz's monadology, and on and on.[15]

Despite the fact that the outcome of a given paraphrase project may be a matter of interminable debate, it is nonetheless the *goal* of such a project to succeed. However difficult it may be to define what success and failure may be, there *is* such a normative structure to reconciliation projects. Let us consider this structure in more detail.

Outcome One: Success

If we are able to successfully reconcile a set of apparently conflicting claims, our error was in judging those claims to be incompatible. This is often due to a less than ideal formulation of one or more of them—i.e., a formulation that is misleading as to the logical qualities of the claim we were using it to express. The importance of paraphrase to such an outcome is clear: it is precisely the existence of a paraphrase that both expresses the claim we want to make and that does *not* seem incompatible with our other intuitions that justifies our belief that the apparent conflict was *merely* apparent.

Even in a case of successful reconciliation, however, we would like to know *why* the misleading formulation was accepted. This is an important reason why it is valuable to

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[15] Other less global forms of skepticism can also be of similar existential importance—skepticism about causality, morality, and freedom of the will are all prime examples. If Hume is right, are causality, morality and free will mere illusions? Or does Hume just have a surprising story about what it is that they are?

have knowledge of the history of philosophy. The theoretical prejudices or predilections of philosophers tend, for obvious reasons, to influence the way in which they formulate both philosophical problems and the various data or known truths against which solutions to philosophical problems are tested. It is possible for these formulations to become more entrenched in philosophical practice than the theory that generated them. Such formulations, however, are often designed to fit a specific theory. If that theory is then rejected in favour of another, pseudo-conflicts can arise between claims expressed in the vernacular of the new theory and claims whose formulations are inherited from the old one. If we do not know the history of the formulations we use, it will be much more difficult to see what is wrong with such problematic ways of formulating philosophical problems. It is widely believed, for example, that Descartes bequeathed to us, in addition to analytic geometry and the method of hyperbolic doubt, a way of formulating claims about ourselves and our relation to the world that has had disastrous effects on subsequent work in epistemology and the philosophy of mind.[16]

[16] Strictly speaking, as a matter of sociological fact, philosophical theories are tested against what *we judge to be* the known truths. Philosophical theories have, unfortunately, been rejected because they were incompatible with widely believed falsehoods. Nonetheless, sometimes when we judge something to be a known truth we judge correctly. For example, I would consider the following to be among the known truths against which philosophical theories are to be tested: what we experience to be true (I am tired now, and I am not in my bedroom), the results of mature and successful science (the sun is a star, and there are many more stars than the naked eye can see), and matters of universal human belief (the existence of other minds, and the immorality of torturing children for fun). By saying that these are known truths, I am not claiming infallibility. It is possible that one or more of the above claims is false—I might be wrong about what the known truths are. The substance of my claim is that, for example, the truth of "I exist and so do you" is *more certain* than the premises of any sceptical epistemology. Please note that I am explicitly allowing that these truths may be formulated in different ways. For all I have said, it may be that Spinoza will be able to formulate these truths

Indeed, we may inherit from the past more than misleading formulations of the truth—we may inherit formulations, demanded by past philosophical orthodoxies, that can express nothing but what are strictly speaking falsehoods. They may, as it were, express something close to the truth—the truth as a past and false philosophical theory was best able to capture it. But falsehoods close to the truth are still false. So in such cases we come to believe something false as a result of accepting a fatally defective formulation of the truth—a formulation incapable of actually expressing that truth. Such formulations may seem innocuous enough, because they express something close to the truth (or almost express the truth)—perhaps close enough that the difference is negligible in most contexts. Such formulations cause philosophical trouble because we, as philosophers, are not interested in near truths, and because we, as philosophers, are particularly good at divining problematic contexts and counterexamples to philosophical claims. [17]

Outcome Two: Failure

Finding a truth in the neighbourhood of our original intuition is a useful strategy to adopt if we cannot reconcile our intuitions: that is, if we decide that the apparently conflicting truths are really conflicting apparent truths. In such cases our error was in taking some claim to be true, and

within his philosophical framework. That is certainly how I would try to interpret him.

[17] An example of what I am thinking of as a near or approximate truth would be the propositions of Newtonian mechanics. What Newton wrote is, strictly speaking, false—but in an extremely important sense it is close to the truth. How, exactly, to analyze the notion of near or approximate truth is beyond the scope of this essay. Nothing I am saying hangs on how it is analyzed—in particular, it need not be analyzed as a species of truth. I have no truck with calling Newtonian theory a very good or useful falsehood. Indeed, that is how I referred to it. But changing labels does not help us gain any insight into the notion of a good falsehood—or into the notion of a near truth. However one wants to analyze the notion, the *existence* of good falsehoods is indisputable: the history of human thought is littered with them.

our task as philosophers is then to explain what went wrong. There are various ways this could happen that do not involve paraphrase at all: often claims seem true simply because everyone accepts them—but there might be no reason at all, in a justificatory sense, *why* everyone accepts them. Much of Foucault's work, for example, is directed at determining to what extent this is true of certain widely shared beliefs or apparent intuitions. And Freud and Marx claim that this is the case with many common beliefs about our motivations for action and about the necessity of certain forms of social order, respectively.

There are of course many other kinds of explanation for why we believe something false. What is important is that one notable kind of explanation involves paraphrase—we took something false to be true because that falsehood was very close to something that *is* true. In such a case some false statement seems equivalent to a true one. Indeed, it may even be the case that in many contexts the two statements are, for most practical purposes, equivalent. For example, the claim that all swans are white is, for most practical purposes, as good as the truth—just as long as one is not in Australia.

Before moving on to a more detailed discussion of some examples, let me briefly summarize what I have claimed so far. First, we are prompted to undertake what I have been calling "reconciliation projects" when we find an apparent conflict among the beliefs we reflectively endorse. The thoughts involved in the conflict may come from a variety of sources—what generates the problem is only that they appear to be in tension and that we are inclined, upon reflection, to think that they are true. But the way we formulate a thought has a very strong influence on how it seems to be logically related to other thoughts. This is of course obvious in the case of formulations which make use of the language of logic, but it is true of other formulations as well. As a consequence, evaluating the relative merits of different formulations of our thoughts plays a critical role in any attempted resolution of apparent conflicts between them. Indeed, our judgements about the adequacy of various formulations directly determines both whether or not we

judge that a reconciliation attempt has succeeded, and, if we judge that it has failed, how serious of a failure we judge it to be.

SECTION FOUR: SOME ILLUMINATING EXAMPLES

In this section, I will look more closely at some examples of the methodology we have been discussing. One interesting example of paraphrase can be taken from 20th century developments in physics. Parmenides' argument against the possibility of things being in a *state* of motion—against the idea of motion as a non-relational property of objects—is best seen as a *reductio* of his premises. Einstein's argument for the same conclusion revolutionized physics. An important difference between the two is that Einstein could explain, in a systematic and unified way, why things *appeared* to be in a *state* of motion—even though the *reality* of the matter is that motion is a *relation*. Although, speaking strictly and philosophically, nothing is intrinsically in motion, we may interpret or re-interpret our ordinary ascriptions of motion as ascriptions of motion relative to the Earth, or whatever inertial frame is contextually relevant. When we say that the train stops in New Brunswick what we say may be expressed in a way that is obviously compatible with current physics by using the expression 'the train stops moving *on the track* in New Brunswick.' The availability of such paraphrases allows us to see why Einstein's position is not in tension with the known facts. That is, Einstein, but not Parmenides, was in a position to say why his conclusion— that there is no intrinsic property of motion—is compatible with the movement of herds, trains, and tectonic plates.

Here we see an example of how paraphrase can be of use in explaining why we took some merely apparent truth to be true. In this case, there was a distinction that we were failing to make—the distinction between intrinsic and relational motion. Modulo that distinction, the truth and the merely apparent truth are one. It seems to follow straightaway from 'the herd is in motion' that motion is an intrinsic property. Once we recognize the distinction, however, we see that we can reject the merely apparent truth that some bodies are

intrinsically in motion, and still capture the known fact—"save the phenomena"—with a paraphrase in terms of relative motion.

Distinctions have an important role in our judgements of the efficacy of paraphrase attempts. Whether we count Kant's transcendental idealism as a form of skepticism depends in large part on whether we think Kant's distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal world is real or spurious. Whether we think that Russell reconciled the truth of singular negative existential statements with the non-being of the purported subjects of those statements will depend on whether we accept the distinction he makes between the grammatical form of such statements and what might be called the logical form of the propositions they express. Likewise, whether we count Spinozistic monism as a form of scepticism will depend in large part on whether we accept a distinction between what might be called the grammatical subjects of various claims and the real subjects of those claims. None of these are distinctions that are noted in ordinary parlance—it is only by critically evaluating our ordinary modes of speech that such distinctions are brought to light.

Differences in the evaluation of various distinctions help explain why certain paraphrase projects are more successful than others. One reason why there is so much more agreement about the successful nature of the reconciliation attempts of Einstein and Russell is that we are in the possession of mature and successful theories which make use of, and thereby legitimate, the distinctions in question—the general theory of relativity and modern logic, respectively. Distinctions that we call "ad hoc" are typically distinctions which do not have any productive application outside of the domain in which they are introduced.

A final point about the physics example—it is noteworthy that whatever temptation there may have been before relativity theory to dismiss the relativity of motion as obviously false, it now commonly thought that the relativity of motion does not seriously threaten our everyday beliefs about the motion of objects. Upon reflection, what we take to be shown false is only our "folk" physics. In particular, it

seems that our naïve concept of motion is flawed in various respects. But this kind of mistake is something that we should not feel deeply disturbed about.

Questions of ontology provide a second example that clearly displays the dialectical structure described by Chisholm. One important way in which claims can appear to conflict is as regards what exists. It is true—it is a theorem of arithmetic!—that there are two primes between three and eleven. It is also true, says the Structuralist, that there are no numbers.[18] Numbers, she thinks, are simply too odd to be real. What *are* they? *Where* are they? But the Structuralist's theory, which says that there are no numbers, seems to conflict with our data: the fact that there are two primes between three and eleven. Chisholm writes:

> [I]f a philosopher has a theory that seems to conflict with our data and if he wishes us to take his theory seriously, then there are two courses open to him. He could show us that, in fact, his theory does not conflict with our data. Or he could undertake the burden of proving that his theory is more reasonable than the data with which we have begun.[19]

Since nothing is more reasonable than our data in this case, the Structuralist must undertake to show us that her theory does not conflict with it—with e.g., the truth of 'there are two primes between three and eleven'. Presumably, the way to do this is to provide a formulation of this claim—a paraphrase—that does not seem to entail the existence of numbers. It is a good question whether or not this can be done—but the answer, of course, hangs on what counts as doing it. About this, Chisholm writes:

> From the fact that a true sentence *seems* to commit us to the existence of a certain object, it does not follow that there *is* in fact such an object. What we should say is rather this: If (i) there is a sentence which seems to commit us to the existence of a certain object, (ii) we know the sentence to

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[18] See, e.g., Geoffrey Hellman, *Mathematics without numbers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[19] Chisholm, 20.

be true, and (iii) we can find no way of explicating or paraphrasing the sentence which will make clear to us that the truth of the sentence is compatible with the nonexistence of such an object, then it is more reasonable to suppose that there is such an object than it is not to suppose that there is such an object. Given an adequate view of the nature of philosophy, it does not seem to me to be reasonable to deny this conditional…[20]

More needs to be said here. First, Chisholm's conditional needs to be qualified a bit. If the objects that our true sentences apparently commit us to are known to be impossible objects—objects with contradictory properties—then the claim that it would be more reasonable than not to suppose that such objects exist would need to be rescinded. Obviously, it is *never* reasonable to believe in the impossible.[21] In such a case, the most reasonable course of action would be to assume that there is some vindicating paraphrase that we have not discovered. Let us add a fourth condition to the three Chisholm cites: the objects whose existence is in question are not impossible or contradictory in nature. This requirement follows from the more general requirement that we not accept a proposition that we see entails a contradiction, no matter how convincing we find the arguments for it. Existentially quantified propositions are no exception.

On the heels of this clarification rides a worry: if we cannot find a paraphrase that reconciles our apparently conflicting intuitions, which, if any, of our apparent intuitions should we revise? In the case at hand, should a philosopher who believes that the nominalistic reconciliation

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[20] Ibid, 117.

[21] It may be that no sentence could satisfy condition (ii) and apparently entail the existence of impossible objects—that is, it may be that we cannot know that a sentence expresses a true claim if that claim apparently commits us to the existence of objects we know do not exist. It would not, however, be too much of a stretch to say that this very situation obtains with respect to certain *very* well confirmed sentences that report the behaviour of subatomic particles.

project has been a failure reject nominalism? Or should she claim that the theorems of arithmetic are not, strictly and philosophically, true? Or should she put her faith in the existence of a heretofore undiscovered vindicating nominalistic paraphrase?

In the case of numbers we find ourselves apparently committed to objects that are not known to be impossible—not known to have contradictory properties—but which are still, in some sense, highly improbable or at least puzzling objects.[22] Many philosophers find an ontology that includes numbers (or abstract objects more generally) to be in some sense intrinsically objectionable.[23] Most realists about mathematical objects do not find the view to be particularly attractive; they have the view to some extent against their wishes, because they cannot find any way of stating the mathematical facts which does not presuppose the existence of numbers. But perhaps it is the case that such realists have been duped. Even if we assume that abstract objects are not

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[22] It is unclear just what judgements of the improbability of the existence of a kind of object come to. Obviously, there is not anything as cut and dried as having contradictory properties for such judgements to be based on. It can be tempting to think that such judgements of improbability are always made on the basis of our other beliefs. Nonetheless, it is possible that we have a faculty for determining the intrinsic probability of various states of affairs or propositions—a faculty for determining the *proper* prior probability for us to assign to a state of affairs or proposition antecedent to our reasoning about whether or not it obtains or is true. Such a faculty would be akin to the faculty that we possess, at least according to Chomsky, for determining the prior probabilities of various grammars.

Here we see a way in which something philosophically problematic and deserving of the name "intuition" could play a role in the kind of philosophical activity that Chisholm describes. While it is not a part of Chisholm's *account* of philosophy that such problematic intuitions play a role, his account does not rule them out either. It is difficult, however, to see how it could rule them out and yet remain descriptively adequate.

[23] Whatever the nature of the abstract/concrete distinction, it is a distinction we *have*, and numbers certainly fall on the non-concrete side of it.

contradictory in nature, they still might be intrinsically objectionable enough that a philosopher should put her faith in the existence of an undiscovered vindicating paraphrase rather than accept them into her ontology. Is this the case?

The answer to this question is not immediately clear. If we have very good reason to think that a claim is true and that it entails the existence of some object, then we would need to have very good reasons to deny that such objects exist. How low the "prior probability" of such objects existing must be, so to speak, in order to defeat a valid argument for them depends on how much support the argument's premises have. This requires a delicate balancing act, but I do not think there are any *particular* difficulties here for arguments stemming from failed reconciliation attempts. In the case at hand, however, I think it would be a formidable challenge to defend the claim that abstract objects are intrinsically objectionable enough to warrant, all other things being equal, blind faith in the existence of a vindicating paraphrase. Mathematical theorems are paradigms of truth, and Nominalists have had centuries to come up with acceptable paraphrases of them and have not succeeded. Why is it that, despite such efforts, no way of expressing the mathematical facts has been found that does not seem to commit us to the existence of numbers? The best explanation would seem to be that no such paraphrases are there to be found.

What I have said above may appear to counsel despair about the potency of philosophy, at least as described by Chisholm et al., since it does not seem that it is in general reasonable to expect agreement as to whether or not a given reconciliation project has succeeded or failed. While I can here only indicate the kind of defence I would give of the following claim, I think such despair would be misguided. First, uncertainty and even uncertain knowledge are part of the human condition: denial of this only leads to skepticism. Second, the primary goal of the philosopher is to increase her understanding of the world, and only secondarily to convince others that she has done so. Accordingly, the existence of rampant disagreement and uncertainty within philosophy does not render it pointless or futile. This,

however, is another subject, and in any case meta-philosophy is not our primary interest. Rather, we are interested in learning what meta-philosophy can teach us about language.

SECTION FIVE: LANGUAGE LESSONS

In this section I will assume that the description of philosophy and the role of paraphrase in it examined above is essentially correct, and attempt to tentatively explore its linguistic presuppositions. According to this picture there are two principal ways in which paraphrase is used in philosophy. The primary way, associated with a successful reconciliation, is in finding a sentence that expresses just what we believe and that implies just what we want to imply. The second use of paraphrase, associated with a failed reconciliation attempt, is in coming up with an acceptable revisionary statement that captures as much as possible of what we originally believed, thereby lessening the force of the hit to our doxastic system caused by having to give up something that appears to us to be true. In what might be considered a mixed case, we realize that the "revisionary" paraphrase captures all we ever really cared about, and that what content is lost in giving up the original formulation is content well lost. In such a case, the paraphrase does not express quite what we actually *did* think, but it does express everything that, upon reflection, we think we *should* have thought in the first place.

One way of thinking about what is novel about the above picture of philosophical activity is that it stands in opposition to a prominent conception of the nature of analytic philosophy. According to Dummett, analytic philosophy is distinguished by the view that a philosophical account of thought can *only* be attained through a philosophical account of language: philosophy of language is first philosophy. This seems to contradict the claim, important to the conception of philosophy we have been discussing, that we can judge the adequacy of various sentences for expressing a certain thought—that we have a kind of access, however tenuous, to the content of thoughts

that is to some extent independent of the linguistic vehicles we use to express them.[24]

But whence comes the disagreement with Dummett? Does he reject the reconciliation model of philosophy, or only some subsidiary thesis? I think it is the latter. Dummett writes:

> The importance of the denial of the mental character of thoughts, common to Bolzano, Frege, Meinong and Husserl…lay…in the non-psychological direction given to the analysis of concepts and of propositions. It is, however, very clear why it was to lead to analytical philosophy, to the analysis of thought by means of the analysis of language. For if one accepts the initial step – the extrusion of thoughts and their components from the mind – one may yet feel unhappy with the ontological mythology [concerning the existence of "concepts" and propositions as abstract objects]…One in this position has therefore to look about him to find something non-mythological but objective and external to the individual mind to embody the thoughts which the individual subject grasps and may assent to or reject. Where better to find it than in the institution of a common language?[25]

According to Dummett, there was, in certain circles at least, a general realization around the time of Frege that for conceptual analyses to be *interesting*, in a sense to be discussed below, concepts have to be non-psychological. With this realization, however, there came a temptation to revert to the Platonic idea that conceptual analysis must be Conceptual analysis—the analysis of something like Plato's Ideas. Most philosophers, however, found such a picture to be metaphysically unsavoury, and in the search for an alternative were led to the idea that conceptual analysis is really *linguistic* analysis—the analysis of the use or meaning of *words*.

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[24] It is hard to know what to call first philosophy on the picture of philosophy we have been discussing. Perhaps, in a Quinean spirit, nothing at all.

[25] Michael Dummett, *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 1993), 25.

Dummett's story is chronologically accurate, but it is my contention that he is mixed up about its heroes and villains. He wants to *identify* analytic philosophy with what some would claim to be a prolonged insurrection against its founding fathers.[26] One important reason why concepts and propositions should be given a non-psychological analysis is that otherwise it is very difficult to see how else they can be *normative* in the requisite sense.[27] Someone who thinks that it is conceptually necessary that gold is yellow has, as a matter of objective fact, a *defective* concept—she does not have the concept of gold that she *should* have. And the defectiveness of the concept does not have to do with not matching other people's concept of gold—even if *everyone* thought that gold must be yellow, everyone would be wrong, because *there is white gold*.[28] I agree with Dummett that the turn against psychologism was historically of great importance. But his claim that the role played by mind-independent propositions in anti-psychologistic philosophy may be played by sentences of public language does not seem to me to be correct. The inter-subjectivity of common language does generate a

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[26] It should be apparent that Dummett's empiricist sympathies bear heavily on his interpretation of history. But the birth of analytic philosophy at the hands of Frege, Russell and Moore was, in large part, a rejection of both idealism *and* empiricism—where here I take empiricism to be a strict doctrine that claims that *all* knowledge comes from the senses. The takeover of analytic philosophy by empiricists was a reversal of the tradition's defining ideals—a reversal that was, happily, temporary.

[27] What sense? Roughly in the sense of normativity in which Foucault *denies* that any concepts are normative. According to a tradition which includes Plato, Frege and David Lewis, certain concepts correspond to *natural* kinds—by using those concepts we carve the world at its joints. These concepts are normative—they are the concepts we *should* have. Indeed, since only natural kinds figure in laws of nature, and since a certain kind of explanation and understanding involves subsumption under laws, our understanding of the world will be severely impoverished if we do not have the concepts we should have.

[28] One way to flesh out this statement would be to say that the role of what we call 'gold' in the best system of laws is much more central than that of what we call 'yellow gold'.

certain kind of normativity—there are uses that conform to the public standard, and there are those that do not. But this is not the kind of normativity that we were looking for: the relevant normative question is about which public standards *should* be adopted. In the above example the question is about what we as a community *should* use the term 'gold' to refer to. The point is highlighted when one considers the fact that in the past someone would have been *deviating* from the public standard if they claimed that white gold was gold. This is not just a pragmatic issue: there is a certain kind of metal, with a specific nature, and our concept of that kind can be more or less correct.

It is for this kind of reason that the idea that philosophy should be *primarily* or *exclusively* concerned with language was a more or less disastrous deviation from the defining insight of analytic philosophy: that a good strategy for learning about *the world* is to carefully analyze the language we use to talk about it. We have discussed one important reason for thinking this: there is simply no way of separating (many) questions about language from questions about the world. To repeat an earlier example, to ask whether or not the term 'God' denotes is not a distinct question from the question of whether or not God exists.

It is of course true, as Dummett notes, that many analytic philosophers have rejected the picture I am urging upon you—including, perhaps most famously, the later Wittgenstein.[29] Wittgenstein and his followers were not primarily interested in trying to *solve* the traditional problems of philosophy using linguistic methods, but rather in replacing those traditional problems (or pseudo-problems, as they were wont to call them) with questions about the use of words. The fundamental difference that separates the position I have been defending from theirs is a disagreement about the nature of meaning. For Frege, the early Wittgenstein, and most analytic philosophers today, the meaning of a declarative sentence, in one important sense of the term, consists in the conditions under which it would be

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[29] The positivists also famously rejected this picture. Much of what I say about Wittgenstein would apply to them, *mutatis mutandis*.

true. So, to revert to an earlier example, to discover what it *means* (in this sense) to say that something is gold is to discover the truth-conditions for such a statement—i.e., to discover what *it is* for something to be gold. But according to the later Wittgenstein and his followers, the meaning of a declarative sentence consists in its *use*, or what are sometimes called its assertion-conditions. What seems to most philosophers today to be a fatal flaw with this account is that we need some way of distinguishing between the proper and improper uses of an expression that does not simply identify the way an expression *should* be used with the way, as it so happens, it *is* used. This, of course, is just the ghost of the problem that prompted Frege et al. to accept a form of Platonism about concepts and propositions in the first place.

While nobody has *shown* that a Wittgensteinian account of the distinction between proper and improper uses of an expression cannot be given, the fate of past efforts is not promising. It is perhaps worth noting that the development of modern logic and semantics has been a huge boon for the truth-conditional account. While work in these two areas is far from complete, the amount of progress that has been made over the course of the last century is truly astonishing. The same cannot be said for efforts to develop a logic and semantics according to the Wittgensteinian paradigm—although no doubt followers of Wittgenstein will have reservations about using productivity in systematic theory building as evidence for truth.

The upshot of all of this is that it would seem that an account of meaning as truth-conditions—at least for the language game played by philosophers—is a presupposition of the conception of philosophy that I have urged upon you. In cases of successful reconciliation, a paraphrase may have the same truth conditions as the formulation it is a paraphrase of, but nonetheless may often have a different pattern of use. While a truth-conditional conception of meaning is currently the received view, it does have prominent detractors; it is certainly not a *trivial* presupposition of the conception of philosophy that I have been trying to elucidate in this paper.

A number of additional interesting claims seem to follow from this way of thinking about philosophy. First, it is a presupposition of the account that sentences with intuitively different meanings—in the sense that they would be translated differently—may be used to express the same thought. Second, it is relations of consistency and inconsistency among our beliefs that primarily interest us, and we are interested in sentences only insofar as they give us clues about such relations between the claims they express. Since the choices of wording we make are largely pragmatic, clues—including *misleading* clues—are the most asserted *sentences* can provide us with in this regard.

Finally, perhaps the most interesting claim to fall out of our discussion is that we are not always *aware* of what does and does not follow from our thoughts. Insofar as content is related to logical form, it would follow that much of the *content* of our thought is not immediately accessible to us—when we are wrong about what follows from what we believe, we are wrong about exactly what it is that we believe. Even someone who does not accept such an account of content might still feel drawn, in light of the above discussion, to the same conclusion, or at least to the conclusion that our ordinary thought has far less determinate content than is typically supposed. If so, it would seem to follow that in doing philosophy we do not so much uncover latent content in our pre-philosophical thought as attempt to supplement and sharpen it.

In conclusion: many of the above ideas—the importance of language, its potential for abuse, the possibility that language can be an obstruction to reaching truth as well as a tool for it—are not unique to analytic philosophy. These themes can be found in Plato and they can be found in Heidegger. But they have not always been, in the history of philosophy, as widely attended to as one might have hoped. What is unique about the past century is the development of the tools of modern logic and semantics and with them our ability to use language with a historically unparalleled self-awareness, clarity and precision. This in turn makes it possible to use language to investigate traditional philosophical problems with a new effectiveness. The use of

these tools also throws into sharp relief the importance of the ideas about language mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph—ideas which, as noted above, philosophers have been known to forget. With these tools in hand, we may reasonably hope, even if we may not perhaps reasonably believe, that those ideas will be forgotten less frequently in the future than they have been in the past.

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