

PHILOSOPHICAL LECTURE

Advice to Philosophers:  
Three New Leaves to Turn Over

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I

THE 20th century may have over nine years to run, but given the speed with which philosophers change their fashions it cannot be too early to suggest a resolution for the new millennium, to identify a leaf that needs turning. That is what I shall try to do, though for the sake of a little variety, without which an hour can be a very long time, I want to speak not of one new leaf but three. They are, however, interconnected—attached to the same branch, one might say, blurring the metaphor. The first concerns our hopes for the theory of meaning, the second our generally offhand attitude towards scepticism; and the third is the widespread disparagement of the epistemically private, that which is knowable by one person only.

When I speak of our hopes for the theory of meaning I don't mean everything that we expect from that quarter, and I am certainly not about to suggest that the investigation of meaning be abandoned as unprofitable. That a sequence of sounds, or of marks, produced here and now, can be made true, or made appropriate, by some utterly different state of affairs at any spatio-temporal distance, is one of the oddest amongst the range of facts that we all take for granted all the time, and it is one of the main achievements of twentieth-century philosophy to have concentrated our minds on it and shown us what an odd phenomenon it is, and how little we really understand it. I expect that we can come to understand it better, and I hope we will. What I am doubtful about, to put it mildly, is the hope evinced by a whole string of philosophers from the beginning of this

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century onwards: that we have found in the theory of meaning an inquiry that can be conducted independently of the large and controversial issues of traditional philosophy, but which can then be turned in their direction with decisive effect. Members of the audience will recall that in Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* the traditional problems of philosophy last about a hundred pages once the Verification Principle is on the table. Nor did the Argument from the Paradigm Case, the direct offspring of a related theory of meaning, take more than a sentence or two to establish the reality of Free Will and our knowledge of an external world, to mention just two of its points of application.

Well before these two there had been Mauthner, and Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*. But nobody has shown much inclination to follow the extreme scepticism about the expressive powers of language which Mauthner appears to advocate; and since, and to some extent because of, Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* neither has there been any rush to believe that language can only express anything where it can achieve an isomorphism with the facts it expresses. But siblings of verificationism, and cousins of the paradigm case argument, are still alive—and claim to be kicking as well, and what they claim to kick about are some of the old issues of metaphysics. I refer, of course, to the role which semantic theory has come to play in the contemporary debate about Realism and its competitors.

So Logical Positivism is no bad place to begin. But when one considers what power it ascribed to a verificationist account of meaningfulness, how much havoc it expected such a theory to wreak, it is a surprising fact about the literature of that movement that arguments for the adoption of the verification principle are not at all easy to find in it. It is almost as if the anti-metaphysical mood of certain philosophers at that time made them feel that the consequences of the principle were in themselves sufficient justification of it: anything that promised *that* much damage to Heidegger had to be right. But although arguments for the principle are, let us politely say, well spaced out, they can be found: a particularly interesting one can be found, in fact, in Moritz Schlick's paper 'Meaning and Verification'. It is an argument from—this has a familiar ring nowadays—the presumed circumstances under which a speaker acquires a grasp of a language, and it goes like this:

It is clear that in order to understand a verbal definition we must know the significance of the explaining words beforehand, and that the only explanation which can work without any previous knowledge is the ostensive definition. We conclude that there is no way of understanding any meaning without ultimate reference to ostensive definitions, and this means, in an obvious sense, reference to 'experience' or 'possibility of verification'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> M. Schlick, 'Meaning and Verification', *Philosophical Review*, 44 (1936) and *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Feigl & Sellars (New York, 1949), pp. 146–70. (This quotation p. 148.)

How does the primacy of ostensive definition lead to the conclusion that we can only learn such meanings as are verifiable? Schlick makes the transition rather quickly, but it is not too difficult to fill in the gap with some confidence. He must have been thinking, surely, that the learner faced with an ostensive definition is confronted solely by what is ostended, shown, manifest, in short by things which, under those circumstances, he indisputably knows to obtain, and that his task in learning the language is simply to select from amongst them those features in virtue of which the teacher applies the word. Nothing else enters into the unconscious calculation which his language-acquisition mechanism has to perform. And since he adds nothing, but only selects, and the selection is made from amongst the manifest features of the ostended situation, the meaning he comes to ascribe to the word cannot but be verifiable; there can be no question of its meaning some state of affairs which he could not in principle know to obtain, or referring to some thing which he could not in principle know to exist.

Schlick has overlooked something. What is critical for the learner's calculation is not what he knows about the ostended situation, but what he believes about it; he makes his selection from the features he believes, rather than those he knows, to be present. Having seen that we also see that Schlick's argument cannot work without a further assumption: that what the learner believes does not go beyond what he could, in principle, know. But in an argument for the verification principle no such assumption can properly be made, for the reason that it lies far too close to the intended conclusion. For why should I be unable to believe something unless I am unable to think it, and if I am unable to think it it can hardly be surprising if my language is incapable of expressing it. So Schlick's argument has a big hole in it; to plug the hole with a bald assumption is to beg the question; an argument for the assumption, on the other hand, would be almost instantly convertible into an independent argument for the verification principle. Which is to say that Schlick's argument actually does nothing.

Professor Michael Dummett has argued on a number of occasions that a speaker's understanding of the meaning of a sentence can only consist in the capacity to recognize that its truth-conditions obtain. He has characteristically argued for this position in two steps: first, he argues that grasp of meaning must consist in the capacity for some kind of overt, manifest, publicly observable behaviour, secondly, that recognition of truth-conditions is the relevant behaviour. Much subsequent discussion has focused on the second step. I shall focus on the first, because here, interestingly, we find Dummett using an argument which at first bears a certain resemblance to Schlick's, but which avoids the error of assuming

that all that can be active in an ostensive definition are the features which the learner is literally shown.

What we learn, Dummett tells us, when we learn a language is the use—and by this he means the overt, observable use—of its expressions and sentences. ‘These things’, he says, ‘are all that we are shown when we are learning the meanings of the expressions of the language . . . , because they are all that we can be shown’, and ‘Hence it can only be in the capacity to make a correct use of the statements of the language that a grasp of their meanings . . . can consist.’<sup>2</sup> That sounds just like Schlick’s mistake all over again: only what we are shown (the overt use) can play any part in the semantics we learn. But unlike Schlick, Dummett is fully aware that that move is far too quick: we have to consider the possibility that more may be involved than what we can be shown. And he rejects this possibility with a separate argument. Were there more to understanding any expression than mastering all the publicly observable features of its use, then we would never know that this ‘more’—whatever it might be—had been mastered. For by definition it is something not publicly observable, so the teacher would not know whether the learner had got it right, nor would the learner know that he had got it right, in the sense that he was doing it the same way as others. Indeed, nobody would know whether anyone else understood the expression in the same way. That ‘is to make meaning . . . in principle incommunicable’. The supposed possibility leads to absurdity; an incommunicable sort of meaning cannot have any part to play in the language we speak to each other.

The first doubt that must occur to anyone is whether the putative possibility really does lead to the incommunicability of meaning. It isn’t obvious that it does. Suppose, to take a plausible example, that the nature of the subjective sensation that a person has when seeing red things makes an essential contribution to the meaning he attaches to sentences containing the word ‘red’. Suppose that most human beings have similar sensations under those circumstances, and that we all have a strong inclination to believe that the subjective states of others are similar to our own. Just in case anyone feels that that supposition needs to be seconded, here is Edmund Burke:

We do and must suppose, that as the conformation of their organs are nearly, or altogether the same in all men, so the manner of perceiving external objects is in all men the same, or with little difference.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> M. A. E. Dummett, ‘The Philosophical Basis of Intuitionistic Logic’, *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Duckworth, 1978), pp. 215–47. (These and subsequent quotations from pp. 216–8.)

<sup>3</sup> E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 13.

This thought it will be convenient to call—paying all due attention to spelling—Burke's assumption. If it is true, then when you say that something is red the sort of state I will think of will be the sort of state you are thinking of, and both of us will believe that to be the case. So we have communicated successfully, and furthermore we believe that we have done so—which is why we have confidence in the procedure and keep on doing it.

What is wrong with that response? Maybe its use of Burke's assumption? Perhaps there is something wrong with the idea that our subjective states are, in the main, similar; perhaps that thought only appears to make sense. Perhaps there is something wrong with the assumption that we all believe it; if it only appears to make sense then there must be, since then there isn't really a thought for us to believe. I will return to these possibilities; for the moment I want to focus on the objection most directly suggested in the passage by Dummett from which I was quoting a moment or two ago. The objection is that if we allow non-manifestable states of speakers to play any essential part, we shall have to accept that 'no individual ever has a guarantee that he is understood by any other individual; for all he knows, or can ever know, everyone else may attach to his words . . . a meaning quite different from that which he attaches to them'.

We should pause to make sure that we know just what the objection is. For earlier in the same piece we find Dummett writing that 'an individual cannot communicate what he cannot be observed to communicate'—suggesting that if we can't know that we understand, then we can't understand, a claim sounding far too close to verificationism to be allowed to stand on its own feet at this stage of an argument which is to have something rather like verificationism as its conclusion. So what is holding it up? The answer, I think, is a line of thought visible in Dummett's text, and recently endorsed by Professor Christopher Peacocke.<sup>4</sup> If meaning depends to any degree on inner states, then a speaker could mean various different things by an expression without there being any difference in anything about him that we could in principle observe. But then we couldn't know which of them he meant, which is to say that we couldn't understand him.

Put like that, the argument still doesn't address itself to the question why it should be necessary for understanding that we know what the speaker means: why isn't it sufficient for us just to hold the right belief

<sup>4</sup> C. Peacocke, 'The Limits of Intelligibility: a Post-Verificationist Proposal', *Philosophical Review*, 97 (1988), 463–96. (The passage here referred to: p. 490.)

about it? But we can imagine the argument being bolstered by the point that if, under the circumstances described, we did hold the right belief about what the speaker meant, that could only be sheer good luck, and that there should be enough of that kind of good luck to keep a language running, to make the understanding of speakers by their audiences more than an occasional treat (which wouldn't even be recognized when it occurred), is flatly incredible.

So long as Burke's assumption remains uncontested, however, it cannot be said that it would just be luck if the audience came to the right beliefs about the speaker's meaning. For that assumption presents it, on the face of it not implausibly, as a fact about human beings that in virtue of certain similarities in our construction we have similar subjective states and believe that to be so. And that is why—so the claim runs—we can usually have the right beliefs about what others mean even if what they mean is affected by the nature of their subjective, publicly unknowable, states. The explanation lies in our nature; no appeal to chance is necessary.

This is also, I suppose, the place to mention beetles in boxes and that wheel of Wittgenstein's which, since it can be turned though nothing else moves with it, is not to be regarded as part of the mechanism.<sup>5</sup> If Burke's assumption is correct then we are, and believe that we are, infested by pretty much the same sorts of beetle, and although we *could* ignore the nature of the beetle and concentrate entirely on the outer properties of the box, no reason has yet been given why we should have to do so. If the wheel of our inner states really did turn although nothing outer moved with it, then the position would indeed be that only chance could lead us to hold the right beliefs about the inner states of others, and therefore, on the contested theory of meaning, the right beliefs about what they mean. But again, if Burke's assumption holds then the wheel *does not* in fact turn independently, and we are all tuned in fairly well to its actual orientation. What it theoretically 'could' do hasn't been shown to matter. So long as the assumption remains uncontested, the force of these famous passages remains dubious. If they be read as attacks on it, it must be doubtful whether they do anything but beg the question.

Burke's assumption certainly can be contested, though how successfully is another issue, and one I shall return to later. But no obvious attempt to contest it is found in these passages from Dummett and Peacocke, so for the moment I shall continue to consider the idea that the need to know we understand (as well as just understanding) has special status, and that no theory which makes it unsatisfiable can remain in serious contention.

<sup>5</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Blackwell, 1953), paras 293 and 271 respectively.

## II

Now I don't believe that anyone would just baldly assert that to understand you I have to know that I understand you, thus arbitrarily making of understanding a sudden exception to the general rule that things can be the case without our knowing it. Nor would I dare to imply that anyone is making a simple appeal to the idea that if I understand you it must be in principle possible for me to know that I understand you—because they would of course see at once that, given the purposes of the argument, nothing that close to verificationism can be allowed to appear much before the last line, and that whenever it appears it had better be as a conclusion not as a premise. Rather more hopeful would be the claim that anyway, obviously we *do* know that we understand each other, so any theory of meaning which makes that impossible is wrong, and that immediately rules out all theories which cast any publicly unknowable matters in an essential semantic role—such as any theory that needs the aid of Burke's assumption to ensure mutual understanding.

So am I guilty as charged? Am I contemplating the denial of the undeniably obvious? I shall argue first that it is not clear that I am; then, more radically, that what I am charged with isn't even a crime. On the contrary: it has the backing, paradoxical though this may sound at first, of a whole lot of common sense.

The first point is that there is too much argument about what knowledge is for it to be at all obvious that the charge will detonate. Some think it sufficient for knowledge that the subject should have acquired a true belief by a reliable method—one suited to generating a very high proportion of true beliefs. But if Burke's assumption is true, and he was right in thinking that we make it, then making it is just such a reliable method, and what it leads us to believe about the mental states of others is known as well as believed. It might be suggested that what we are really after isn't so much knowing, as knowing that we know. But since we form the belief that we know by a simple reflection on the consequences of combining Burke's assumption with a reliabilist account of knowledge, that method surely becomes reliable as well if both of these are true. So the belief that we know turns out to be knowledge; in other words, the reliabilist's point is reusable, and iterating 'knows that' doesn't alter the position. What would alter it is a successful argument either to show that Burke's assumption isn't true, or that we don't make it, or that reliabilism is mistaken. None of those are settled beyond controversy—far from it.

I should say at once that I think of this first point as only a minor irritant, because in this context the appeal to reliabilism does not feel to me to have much depth. It tells us that if beliefs of a certain type are true then

they are reliably acquired, and therefore known; and, it may go on, we do believe them to be true, so we ought to believe them to be known. But that we believe them was where we started from, and if the question whether we also know them had any point at all, surely it was that we wanted to find some confirmation that the belief was reliable. And if that was what we wanted it will not be very satisfying to hear that yes, the belief is known provided that it's true. To put the matter another way: if that is an answer, I don't know what the point of the question was. The possibility remains open, of course, that most sceptical debates do revolve around a question that there is no point in asking; but to be clear about that one we should have to understand not just issues relating to the analysis of concepts like knowledge, and reason, or whatever the current sceptic would have us exercise ourselves about, but also (as a minimum) the purposes behind our use of them. So that is something much more far-reaching, certainly not to be settled just by introducing a reliabilist analysis of the concept of knowledge.

We need something deeper, capable of addressing deeper worries. One such is suggested by something I have just said, namely that a desire can arise to find a mark of the reliability of some class of beliefs, one which we can use for assurance of the reliability of our own beliefs of that class without having to assume their truth in the process. One such mark, traditionally and understandably, was the fact of being supported by good reasons. It was hoped and held that we can see that good reasons are good reasons without having to know already that the beliefs they are taken to be reasons for are true. Whatever other conceptions of a reason there may be, it is only the sort that satisfy that principle which can be a useful mark of truth or likelihood. It was with this important conception of a reason in mind, I take it, that Professor Crispin Wright once wrote<sup>6</sup> of the 'inescapable price' of adopting a theory of meaning which allows an essential role to publicly undetectable items. The price was, he said, 'the surrender of any possible reason to suppose that there is such a thing as mutual understanding'. Some, he added in a footnote, seemed prepared to pay it, and he mentioned one person in particular—who will now say a few words in justification of the expenditure. For Professor Wright's perceptions were not at fault, at any rate not in my case: I am quite prepared to pay the price he names.

The proper interpretation of the financial metaphor, I take it, is in terms of degree of implausibility. The higher the price, the nearer to a *reductio*. On that scale, the sum involved shouldn't be considered very

<sup>6</sup> C. J. G. Wright, *Realism, Meaning and Truth* (Blackwell, 1987), p. 20.

high, which is why I am happy enough to pick up the bill. That a theory has that consequence is on my estimate nowhere near a *reductio ad absurdum* of it.

There is a widely held and—as such things go—pretty well supported view to the effect that we are parts of the natural world and arose in natural ways. Our ancestors were highly successful in the game of natural selection, and since then we have done so well that now we can even fiddle with the rules. What part might we expect reason to have played in this success?

Let us remember what is meant by ‘reason’ here. The word refers to our capacity to give reasons for our beliefs, and to come to new beliefs as a result of noticing that beliefs we already hold are good reasons for them. It does not refer to our capacity to come to believe truths, except in so far as we come to believe them as a result of reasoning. And once we have that distinction in view doubts must arise about the scope of reason’s field of operation. In order to act successfully and efficiently our ancestors needed true beliefs on a wide variety of matters. And since, obviously enough, they couldn’t be born with them all, they needed effective ways of acquiring them. But that consideration gives no preference to any specific way of acquiring them; in particular, it gives no preference to the method of deriving them from other beliefs by reasoning, nor to methods which can *post factum* be represented as embodying such reasoning. Admittedly, it isn’t that just any process which delivers true belief satisfies the requirement, because in many cases what is needed is a very high level of conviction—so that appropriate action may be both wholly committed and more or less instantaneous. But again, this point confers no special status on reasoning, except on the assumption (which has precious little to recommend it) that it is only reasoning that produces real conviction. If anything, it threatens whatever status reasoning may have; for reasoning is a fairly slow process and very often true beliefs are needed fast. Of course, there may be very fast processes whose reliability can afterwards, in times of lesser urgency, be certified by reasoning; but what, except an antecedent prejudice about its potential all-pervasiveness, could make one think that all such processes have to be rationally certifiable? Why should they be?

At least equally attractive, surely, is a picture painted broadly in the style of Hume, though allowing that the details are bound to be vastly more intricate than his simplistic theory of belief-formation would have it: that the disposition to acquire beliefs of our most basic, everyday take-it-for-granted types has long since been built into our hardware; given standard, familiar input, they just pop up, ineradicable by anything short of a pathological derangement of our inner mechanism, quite independent of anything that our power of giving reasons may or may not declare about

them. Nature, as Hume wrote of the belief in an external world, 'has doubtless esteemed it an affair of too great importance, to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations'.<sup>7</sup> It is perfectly possible, indeed likely, that our forerunners came by their beliefs in this way for hundreds of thousands of years before any of them began giving reasons, and probably it took tens of thousands more before philosophers began to determine which kinds of transition from thought to thought counted as satisfactory reasoning. They then worked out certain canons, which we implicitly refer to when we deny that we can give good reason for thinking that anyone else's subjective mental states are like our own. There is no particular reason to expect that we can apply these canons right across the whole range of our beliefs and in every instance keep on getting the answer 'Yes, we can give good reasons for believing that'. As a means of enlarging our stock of true beliefs reasoning has, once a modicum of sophistication of planning and forethought is attained, an undeniable place, since it gives those possessed of it a degree of power which amply compensates for its relatively slow and uncertain action. But there are no grounds for thinking that it had a part, or even could have had a part, in the early stirrings of human mentality during which our basic types of belief and methods of belief-formation were laid down. And if there are no grounds for thinking that, then neither are there any grounds for thinking that if we now reflectively reconsider them and their output we will be able to discover satisfactory reasoning to validate them, except in so far as we actually find this to be the case. Sometimes it may be, but there is no must about it; we have no right of anticipation.

I grant that it sounds strange to say that we have no reason to think that we understand each other. But it may well be that it sounds strange for reasons quite harmless to the point I am making. Beliefs which come automatically to all human beings will be likely to strike us as very convincing and utterly obvious. And since 'we have no reason to believe X' is a form of words which usually precedes a recommendation to suspend belief, or refrain from forming an opinion, it is bound to sound odd when directed to some belief which we all have, couldn't give up even if we wanted to, and wouldn't know how to live without. But why, in these cases, should it have that import? Whence the idea that if only we could, it would be right to ditch equipment that has been with us from the hominids to here just because it can't be certified reliable by our powers of reasoning? The alternative isn't so unattractive: maintain our faith in nature to do the right thing by us, and recognize that the business of finding

<sup>7</sup> D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Selby-Bigge rev. Nidditch (Oxford University Press, 1978) p. 187.

and giving reasons for our beliefs has its limits. After all, we are nowadays familiar with the idea of reaching the bedrock where our spade is turned.

There is another route, this one very much a late-twentieth-century philosopher's route, to the rejection of the view that there may be all sorts of immovably entrenched beliefs for which we have no reasons. Just as one can give an externalist account of the concept of knowledge, like that offered by reliabilism, so one can give an externalist account of what it is to have a good reason. Then we may well find ourselves in a position with respect to reasons just like that discussed earlier with respect to knowledge: that if our 'hard-wired' beliefs are true—which of course we believe them to be—then we have good reasons for them. That line of thought, however, shouldn't worry us at all; because if that is how 'having a good reason' is to be understood, a theory that helps itself to Burke's assumption should have no difficulty in declaring us to have good reason to believe that we understand each other, even though it makes mutual understanding depend on sharing the same sorts of subjective state. When Wright spoke of 'the surrender of any possible reason to suppose that there is such a thing as mutual understanding' it was not that conception of reason that he was talking about.

What conclusion should we draw from all this? That we can support our confidence in mutual understanding with reasons (in the required sense) is just a hypothesis. It is not, nor could it very well be, confirmed by any observations; no theoretical considerations speak with any vigour in its favour; those few which we can bring to bear tell, if anything, against it. Its negation is therefore a wide open, and indeed quite plausible, possibility, and the last thing it is suited to is the title role in a *reductio ad absurdum*. There is nothing absurd about it.

### III

I am sure that there will be a number of people who feel that whether such scepticism about the scope of reasoning is absurd, or plausible, or inescapable, is not the decisive issue. From the first mention of it they will have had their guns trained on the assumption that our inner states are much the same in all of us. They can understand, probably, how a Burke—or some similarly pre-Wittgensteinian thinker, could have favoured it. But since we have had a chance to assimilate the lessons of the *Philosophical Investigations* it has become nothing more than an old-fashioned naïvety, and a theory of meaning which needs it in order to account for the possibility of mutual understanding is no better.

Disposing of Burke's assumption, I take it, must mean arguing that we

can't, rather than that we just don't, make the judgements of cross-personal similarity that it ascribes to us, and that the further assumption that these judgements are mostly true is therefore spurious: there is something bogus, in other words, about the notion of cross-personal similarity of subjective states. So it isn't quite the same thing as arguing for the impossibility of a private language, where no trans-personal question is involved, and we need to be very cautious when tempted to infer results about one from results about the other. To see that the warning is no formality, notice that since the states supposedly referred to in a private language all pass before the same consciousness, whereas those mentioned in Burke's assumption never do so, arguing for the unverifiability of the relevant similarity-judgements may be quite a different matter in the two cases. Or if it be thought, as has sometimes been argued, that judgements of similarity must rest on some kind of agreement in practice amongst members of a community, then perhaps things can be said for the viability of Burke's assumption which are not available to the isolated would-be speaker of a private language. Some ways of thinking of either may relate equally to both, but that is never to be taken for granted, and it will always be good tactics to remind ourselves that it is Burke's assumption, and not private languages, which we are here discussing.

Opponents of Burke's assumption should guard against over-confidence at this stage. Refuting it will almost certainly involve showing that a certain type of judgement is illusory, only looks like a judgement. Most attempts to show that sort of thing have involved appeal to some theory about meaning or contents of thought; indeed it is hard to see how they could succeed without one. And since Burke's assumption must surely be granted some measure of natural plausibility, any such theory will need fairly stout foundations to be able to compete with it. Verificationism, backed by a good argument, looks as if it would do the assumption some damage. But—this is the clear message of our discussion so far—where are we to find the argument, unless Burke's assumption has already been disposed of? And a rather more general point is emerging: any argument, whether or not verificationist in its aim, which trades on the principle that a *bona fide* content of thought must be uniquely manifestable in some overt facts about the thinker will obviously have to be very cautious about how it introduces that lemma. The evidence is (once again) that it will have to disarm Burke's assumption before it can do so, which would mean that no argument from the need for manifestability can significantly threaten the assumption—until something else has killed it first. The attempts we have looked at so far this evening don't threaten it at all—they just overlook its threat to them.

A topic that has attracted a great deal of interest recently is

Wittgenstein's discussion of following a rule, and this is one place where some will wish to look for a possible refutation of Burke's assumption. If there is one to be found it must, I take it, run pretty much along the following lines: if I am to be said to follow a rule I must behave consistently, that is, in the same way as on earlier occasions. Then there must be some fact in virtue of which I am doing the same sort of thing as I did before. But this fact can only be the existence of a communal practice with which my individual practice accords.

Now, ignoring the fact that I haven't said anything at all about the arguments for that rather surprising conclusion, and not burdening ourselves with any of the fancy footwork needed to clear it of the charge of falling straight into infinite regress (for it seems to say that 'going on in the same way' means 'going on in the same way as the others'), let us just ask what that conclusion, if established, would do to Burke's assumption. If it refutes it, then that must be because the assumption speaks of similarity between private subjective states, with respect to which, because of their privacy, there can be no communal practice; and if no communal practice, then no genuine facts about similarity. Burke's assumption tries to extend the concept of similarity beyond any possible grounding in communal practice, and is therefore spurious.

But even allowing that the arguments about rule-following can really be used to prove so strong a conclusion, it is still far from clear that the attack on Burke's assumption will strike home. After all, if Burke's assumption is true, then does that not mean that there is a communal practice with regard to inner states? It means that you may tell me of your inner states, and I may agree with what you say; and it makes it possible that I might disagree with you, even if my disagreement only takes the form of thinking that you must be insincere, or that you don't know what the words mean that you have used. But unless I accept some form of incorrigibility thesis in addition to Burke's assumption there is no reason why I shouldn't sometimes disagree with you in the stronger sense of thinking that you are just substantively mistaken. If that isn't communal practice, then I must admit to incomprehension. What more could one be asking for? There I have only one suggestion: the idea might be that the practice has to be based on common knowledge, not just on common belief. But is that suggestion even worth making? For one thing, the principle that there is no similarity without communal practice then becomes so strong that one wonders whether the considerations about rule-following could possibly sustain it. (There was enough doubt about that even in its weak form.) And for another thing, what of the threat that would then loom against the rest of language and thought? Namely: that until it is certain that we know that there are tables etc. it is uncertain whether there is any communal practice

with respect to the word 'table', and consequently uncertain whether it really expresses any concept—and we have left the fate of the whole of language hanging on the outcome of the scepticism-debate.

There might seem to be an obvious counter: that means that if scepticism were true it couldn't be stated, so it is false. But that is a dangerous move in this context, because it invites the response: then if scepticism about these allegedly private items were true, it couldn't be stated. So it is false, which means that there is knowledge of them after all, which means in turn that with regard to those items there can after all be communal practice (even in the strong sense); so talk about them can have a good sense and Burke's assumption is reinstated. And this response can hardly be rebutted by claiming that in the case of supposedly private items it is indeed quite true that scepticism can't even be stated; because that, without support from elsewhere, just begs the question against Burke's assumption when what we were hoping to hear was an argument against it.

Another possible line of attack comes to mind. There used to be a type of theory—of which the classical empiricists are thought to have held a particularly notorious version—that regarded meanings as kinds of mental state or inner object, and understanding as being the capacity to summon these things to appear before consciousness. But Wittgenstein powerfully argued that no such theory can be right, since whatever state or object we consider it must be possible to put a variety of interpretations on it, or in other words, to make it the vehicle of a number of different thoughts. So it cannot by itself constitute the meaning of a word or the content of a thought, because there is no particular meaning or content which, by itself, it would be. What particularizes it must therefore be something else, which by the same argument can't be an inner state or object, but must be something quite different. A widely favoured candidate is that it must be some kind of disposition; but be that as it may, it isn't an inner state or object, and now doesn't that result conflict with the view that the nature of a thinker's inner states may be essential to the content of some of his thoughts and the meanings of some of his words—so long as we are allowed Burke's assumption to make sure that understanding occurs?

But no, there is no conflict here. The doctrine in question does not say that meanings are inner states; it says only that in certain cases the nature of inner states may be essential to meaning. That is quite compatible with the view that meanings must be dispositional in character. For that view does not constrain the ways in which the crucial dispositions may be specified, so that for all it tells us to the contrary, in some cases part of the disposition might be the tendency to play host to certain types of inner state. It may, of course, be thought that although there is no constraint of this kind coming from the thesis that 'meanings are not objects',

nevertheless there is a further constraint denying any role to inner states, and that it derives from elsewhere. But where—unless it is one of the locations we have already searched?

Professor Peacocke has recently made a new proposal about meaningfulness or intelligibility. Accepting the widespread feeling that philosophers are sometimes led to think that certain forms of words express judgements when really they do not, but holding also that the verification principle drew the line in the wrong place (and, for good measure, for the wrong reason), he offers instead what he calls the ‘Discrimination Principle’. I quote:

... the principle to which we need to appeal is not verificationism, but is rather a principle of discrimination. What I shall call ‘The Discrimination Principle’ is the claim that *for each content a thinker may judge, there is an adequately individuating account of what makes it the case that he is judging that content rather than any other.*<sup>8</sup>

Might the discrimination principle pose a threat to the intelligibility of Burke’s assumption? Might putative judgements about trans-personal similarities between inner states fail the test and be unmasked as spurious?

Once again, no. They don’t fail the test because, contrary perhaps to first appearances, there is as yet no test to fail. There is no test because the discrimination principle as stated is nothing but a special case of the general principle that if two things are different there must be a difference between them. If  $p$  and  $q$  are different judgements, then judging the one must be different from judging the other, and then the right account of content must show a difference between them. Conversely, if two judgements are not really different, the right account of content will give the same account of each. Agreed, but from this nothing can follow as to which judgements are genuine, which illusory. When Professor Peacocke later writes that ‘The Discrimination Principle rules out the possibility of a private language’,<sup>9</sup> this can only be an ellipsis: perhaps the principle *plus the right theory of meaning* rules out private languages. Nobody doubts—how could they?—that the right theory of meaning will draw the line between intelligibility and unintelligibility in the right place. But that doesn’t help us find it, still less does it help us find an argument in its favour. It certainly needs an argument, and if it is to rule out Burke’s assumption it needs a strong argument, because that Burke’s assumption is unintelligible would be a very surprising result.

<sup>8</sup> Peacocke, *ibid.* p. 468.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 493. Note however that Peacocke does not seem to treat this as an ellipsis here, so the point raises doubts about the force of his argument.

A number of us may well have lost sight of how surprising a result it would be. I would speculate that what obscures our view, if so, is a certain very general tendency in 20th-century philosophy to think primarily in terms of the concepts of action, operation, prediction and control. It manifests itself in the theory of logic, epistemology, ethics and philosophy of science as well as the philosophy of language and of mind, and there can be no question of my enumerating the manifestations here.<sup>10</sup> But what happened in the latter two areas is that we have persistently been enjoined to think of language use in terms of actions performed to produce responses, to ask, in Wittgenstein's phrase, how we *operate* with words, to cure ourselves of hang-ups about what isn't *part of the mechanism*. Meanwhile two of the most influential movements in the philosophy of mind, behaviourism and functionalism, have encouraged us to view the mental through the concepts of input and output. A natural concomitant of this, part cause part effect, has been a climate highly unfavourable to subjective inner states in which the fact—as I strongly suspect—that the arguments about them are all holding each other up by their bootlaces can easily remain undetected amidst the generally low visibility. In that case what is at stake here is far more than some relatively technical question about what elements are admissible in a theory of meaning: it is our estimate of where the highlights should fall in our picture of the human being, whether on what it feels like from within, or on how it works when viewed from without. That is the kind of contrast of attitude which can affect an entire culture; whether inner states have any place in semantic theory is by comparison just the foam on the surface of the deep.

So what of the three leaves that we were to turn over? Well, I hope that philosophers will continue to pursue their interest in the theory of meaning, though without trying to force it into the shape of the great key that shall unlock the door to metaphysics; that we should recognize that a properly understood scepticism is not unlikely to be true, and at the very least that it is utterly unqualified to stand as the penultimate line in a *reductio ad absurdum*. Finally, that we should become much more careful in our treatment of the epistemically private, much more demanding and critical in the face of arguments against it. As I have already implied, this isn't just a matter of keeping some technical little corner tidy. If our view of the theory of meaning is to influence our view of reality, and our view of privacy is to determine our view of the mind, and our view of scepticism is to constrain our view of the relationship between them, then all these things had better be well thought out; together they cover rather a lot of

<sup>10</sup> I have done so elsewhere: see Edward Craig, *The Mind of God and the Works of Man* (Oxford University Press, 1987), chap. 6.

philosophy—indeed there may not be very many questions left unaffected. So this building needs really convincing foundations; either that, or it should be regarded as dangerous. Those who despair of the former will opt for the latter; fortunately they can take comfort in the fact that, despite the prominence of the theory of meaning in twentieth-century thought, many do manage to do their philosophy without infringing any of those three requirements. May their efforts prosper.