

**THE ROLE OF PRAGMATICS
IN CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY**

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IN DER GEGENWARTSPHILOSOPHIE**

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Graham Priest

LANGUAGE, ITS POSSIBILITY, AND INEFFABILITY

The Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* argues – or at least hints – that propositions say something about reality, but that all that is involved in the very possibility of propositions, their structure and their relationship to reality, can only be shown. And what can be shown cannot be said. Of course, this conclusion depends on Tractarian doctrines of a very particular kind, and one may well not subscribe to these.

It is not just the system of the *Tractatus* that results in there being something ineffable about the nexus between language and reality, however. Many of the major semantic theories of the 20th Century do so also: Frege's, and any other theory that takes words to have semantic bearers; a truth-conditional account of the Quine/Davidson kind; and even accounts which ground meaning on things as different as language games (the later Wittgenstein) or différance (Derrida). (This is argued in Part IV of Priest 1995.) In every case, the exact nature of what is ineffable concerns the very possibility of language itself, though how, exactly, this cashes out, depends on substantive views about the nature of language, views which one may, of course, contest. Still, the fact that the ineffable raises its head in all these cases, at least suggests that there is something more fundamental going on here: there is something about the nature of language, and the way that it functions, that is intrinsically ineffable (though each theory may get a different "fix" on it, as it were). This is what I wish to make plausible in this essay. The aim, then, is to support the Tractarian conclusion about the ineffable, without the Tractarian theory of meaning—or any other substantive assumptions concerning the nature of language.

This may sound a tall order. I will try to make the task easier by breaking it into two steps. I shall argue, first, that for any language there is something that cannot be expressed in that language. I will then argue for the quantifier switch: There is something that cannot be expressed in any language.

Let us turn to the first stage. It is hardly news that some languages cannot express everything there is to be expressed. A simple formal language without arithmetical vocabulary, for example, cannot express the facts of arithmetic. Such languages are conceptually impoverished. Tarski claimed that a natural language, such as English, is universal: it can express anything that can be expressed. Tarski's optimism does not seem justified—at least if by 'English', we mean English as it is spoken at some time and place. There is no way in which the English of Shakespeare could express facts about quantum physics or computer programs. To do this, one requires the possession of certain concepts and linguistic expressions

which were not available to Shakespeare. One might suggest that such facts could be expressed without the appropriate words, by means of paraphrase. This is to imply that the expressions could be defined in terms already present in Elizabethan English, which strikes me as just plain false. The meanings of the modern terms are intrinsically dependent upon certain theories in physics and mathematics, theories that were not available to Elizabethans. Of course, the expressions could be added to Elizabethan English, as ultimately they were, in the context of the appropriate scientific development. But that is another matter.

One might try to turn this observation into an argument to the effect that for English (or any other natural language) at any stage there are facts that are relatively ineffable. The crucial question here is whether English (or any other natural language), as spoken at any time, will always be conceptually enrichable in the way described. This may indeed be so, but I see no persuasive way of demonstrating it.

Given a certain orthodoxy, there is a very simple demonstration that even natural languages are conceptually impoverished. Assuming that the structure of a natural language, at least when regimented, is that of first order logic, and that its underlying logic is classical—or even intuitionistic—Tarski's Theorem assures us that the language cannot express its own truth predicate, and hence that there will be facts about truth that cannot be expressed in it. I shall not argue in this fashion either, though. First, the argument depends upon the assumption of an explosive logic, which I reject. There is nothing to prevent a first-order language with a suitable underlying paraconsistent logic from containing its own truth predicate. (See Ch. 9 of Priest 1987.) More importantly, the assumption that a natural language is, *au fond*, a first order language, clearly makes assumptions—and highly contestable ones—about the nature of language, which I wish to avoid here.

So how to proceed? The fact that one cannot say what the information is that cannot be expressed in a natural language, such as English, obviously causes something of a difficulty in arguing for its existence. I will try to circumvent the problem by showing that there are systems of representation for which there clearly are inexpressible facts of a certain kind. One can even say what these are. I will then argue that languages are sufficiently similar to such systems of representations to make it reasonable to believe that they, too, will have similar inexpressible facts.

Let us start by considering a passage from Wittgenstein, not the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, but of the *Investigations*. At Section 139, Wittgenstein asks us to consider a mental image of a cube, points out that the representation is one thing, but how to apply it is another. Bearing this point in mind, consider ordinary maps. These are certainly representations. Given a map, it may, in fact, represent various information, for example, that there is a church north of a crossroads. All well and good, but for the map to be applied, one must know various facts about how the map relates to reality: e.g., which symbol on the map represents some particular geographical place, which direction on the map corresponds to which direction on

the ground. And this information is not contained on the map itself. The map depicts internal relations between geographical objects, but not the relationships between the map and the objects themselves. There is therefore clearly determinate information that transcends expression in this form of representation.

Maps are, of course, pictures of a certain kind. And, the *Tractatus* notwithstanding, language and pictures are not the same thing. It may well be thought that expressive limitation is inherent to pictorial representation, but not to linguistic representation. Let us therefore consider a transition example, similar enough to the map case to allow the same point to be made, yet clearly linguistic. This is the case of a coordinate system.

Consider a coordinate system, say, of a kind used in physics. Given such a system, there are many facts that it can be used to express. We can say, e.g., that a particle with a certain velocity is located at a certain place (coordinate location); or that a particle with a certain trajectory will pass through a certain location. But what we cannot express is the relationship of the coordinate system to the reality it coordinates. All places are expressible relative to the coordinate system: the coordinate system cannot locate itself: that must be done by some other information. E.g., that the origin is located at a certain spot in physical space. There must be such information; for, just as with the map, it is necessary to know it to apply the information provided in terms of the coordinate system in practice. Without it, manipulating the information would just be a game, like chess. The inexpressible information is therefore information that is crucial to the very possibility that the coordinate system provides a system of representations at all.

Now let us come to a natural language, such as English. This system of representations is quite analogous to a coordinate system. Reality is contingent, prone to change. One can describe such change only with something that is relatively fixed. In the case of representations couched within a coordinate system, this is the system itself. In the case of a natural language, this is the set of meanings of its words. Both provide a framework of relative stasis within which the flux of events can be calibrated. But as we have seen, there must be facts of the matter which determine how the coordinate framework is "fixed on" to reality, or the representations it provides would float free; and these must transcend representation within the coordinate system itself. Similarly, there must be facts of the matter about how the meanings of the language are fixed with respect to the world, and these must transcend what can be represented with those very meanings. To use a metaphor that Wittgenstein uses in a slightly different context (*Tractatus*, 5.633): what makes visual representation possible, the eye, is not represented in the visual field itself. There is, then, information about the system of representations that is English---which concerns the very possibility of that language---that is inexpressible within English.

So far, the argument has attempted to establish the existence only of relatively inexpressible facts, i.e., facts that cannot be stated with respect to a given

language. We now turn to the second part of the proceedings, which is to show that there are absolutely inexpressible facts, i.e., facts that can be stated in no language.

In his introduction to the *Tractatus*, Russell suggests that although certain facts are inexpressible in the language of the *Tractatus*, they are expressible in a metalanguage. Hence ineffability is avoided. Wittgenstein never, as far as I know, replied to this suggestion, but I doubt that he was very impressed by it. Invoking a metalanguage does not really solve the problem; it merely delays it.

To see one reason why, think, first, about a very orthodox situation. As I noted, it is frequently suggested that Tarski's Theorem shows that the notion of truth for a language is not expressible in that language; but it is expressible in a metalanguage. Of course, the notion of truth for that language cannot be expressed in it, but it can be expressed in a meta-metalanguage, and so on. Does this show that all facts about truth are effable?

Not at all. Let L be the whole hierarchy. There will be semantic facts about L that cannot be expressed in any language in L . For example, given that truth is cumulative up the hierarchy, suppose that we can express in L the function $T(i)$, such that for any ordinal, i , $T(i)$ is the truth predicate for the language of order i . Then, assuming that the language contains quantification over ordinals, we can define an absolute truth predicate for L in L , Tx , as: for some i , $T(i)x$. This is impossible, by Tarski's Theorem. Hence $T(i)$ cannot be defined in L or, a fortiori, any of the lesser languages. Facts concerning T , e.g., that it is predicable of a particular sentence, are therefore ineffable.

This is not the argument we are presently looking for. There is, in general, no guarantee that it is facts about truth that are ineffable in a given language; and we cannot assume that classical logic is the underlying logic of the hierarchy, and so that Tarski's Theorem applies to it. However, it is not difficult to generalise the argument to give us what we require.

Let $L(0)$ be any language. There is a fact that cannot be expressed in it, $F(0)$. Either this is absolutely ineffable, and we have what we need, or it can be expressed in another language, $L(1)$. We may assume that $L(1)$ contains $L(0)$ as a proper part (merely taking the union of $L(0)$ and $L(1)$ otherwise). But there is a fact that cannot be expressed in $L(1)$ (and so $L(0)$), $F(1)$. Either $F(1)$ is absolutely ineffable, and we have what we want, or it is expressible in a language $L(2)$, and so on. Given any hierarchy of languages $L(i)$, $i < j$ we can form their union $L(j)$. This is a language, and so there is a fact that cannot be expressed in it, $F(j)$. Either it is absolutely ineffable, or it can be expressed in a language $L(j+1)$, etc.

Either, then, there are some ineffable facts, or there is a hierarchy of languages, $L(i)$, one for each ordinal, i (and a corresponding hierarchy of relatively inexpressible facts, $F(i)$). Have we avoided ineffability? Not at all. Let L^* be the union of all the $L(i)$ s. Since this is a language, there is a fact, F^* , that cannot be expressed in it. F^* must be ineffable. It cannot be expressed within L^* or, a fortiori, any of the lesser languages. But it cannot be expressed in a metalanguage for L^* ; by

construction, there isn't one: the hierarchy had already been extended as far as it will go.

The preceding argument is a somewhat technical one, employing, as it does, fairly heavy set-theoretic apparatus. And one might suspect that the result is merely an artifact of this machinery. But in fact, given but one assumption, the argument can be stripped of all its technical complexity.

We have established the lemma that for every language there is a fact inexpressible in it. Now consider the totality of all languages. The assumption in question is that this can be thought of as itself a language, L. If this assumption is correct, then, by the lemma, there is a fact, F, that cannot be expressed in L. And since L is the totality of all languages, F is absolutely inexpressible: ineffable.

The assumption may well be doubted, but it seems a very reasonable one. The vocabulary of L is simply the union of the vocabularies of all (other) vocabularies. The grammar of L is that grammar which takes a string to be grammatical iff it is grammatical in some (other) language; no hybrids. And a sentence means m in L iff it means m in some (other) language. A sentence is likely to be highly ambiguous since it may occur in more than one language. No matter: ambiguity is rife in many languages; this one is no different.

We have now reached the Tractarian conclusion. There is a fact that cannot be expressed in any language. What is it? The fact which, I argued, is inexpressible relative to any given language, concerned the possibility of that language as a form of representation. The ineffable fact, F, is the corresponding fact for the totality of all languages. It is therefore a fact about the very possibility of language in general.

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UNIQUE AND IDLE - BUT NOT PRIVATE OR MEANINGLESS

Are there meanings which cannot be understood comprehensively in terms of purely pragmatic notions? I call an attempt to understand what a speaker says *comprehensive* only if it doesn't preclude anything that the speaker *experiences* as important and relevant in what he is saying. But, obviously, the problem of importance and relevance in experience shouldn't now be formulated in terms of a pragmatic view of meaning, because that would most probably make the first question empty or vacuous. By *pragmatic* (or pragmatist) notions I refer to any such notions which describe language and meaning *as* rule-governed action or behavior, especially as socially co-ordinated or conjoint action and behavior (for the latter, see Allwood, 1995). I assume that action which is pragmatistically acceptable is ruled-governed, that is, it is guided by the minimal rationality of a subject or an agent who is able to follow rules and make decisions concerning the correct applications of the rules in a social situation.

Often pragmatists justify their view of meaning by the desire or need to avoid mentalist explanations. Thus there is a natural connection between behaviorism and the pragmatic position, though pragmatists often replace perceptual stimuli and behavioral response by some social perception and rule-governed social action respectively. But in the latter case, too, the crux is that the rules of behavior don't require or consist of mental representations of the reality or of any internal referential entities to which the speaker is supposed to focus his inner attention. The reality which the pragmatist is willing to confer to a rule is not of the mental kind, and the reality is not necessarily much stronger than what a regularity or stability of use can provide. Among other things, the correct application of a rule can have quite fuzzy boundaries.

A great deal of this kind of thinking has been motivated by the belief that mental entities, if there are such, are somehow unreliable, perhaps somewhat volatile, and inaccessible to the control which the objectivity of meaning requires and which only commonality can provide. For example, it may indeed look as if we could give a sharp definition of a mental entity, say of the meaning of a word in an internal cognitive code, but, at the same time, it seems that we would lack almost all criteria for the correct application of the definition. The main reason, so continues the pragmatist's story, for this unreliability, volatility, inaccessibility and uncontrollability is that mental entities are basically *private*, that is, accessible only for a single person. Traditionally they are also thought to be, due to their immediate accessibility, something that a person who possesses them cannot genuinely doubt. Without the possibility of doubt, an experience can serve neither