

The Language Animal

*The Full Shape of the Human
Linguistic Capacity*

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Designative and Constitutive Views

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How to understand language? This is a preoccupation going back to the very beginning of our intellectual tradition. What is the relation of language to other signs? To signs in general? Are linguistic signs arbitrary or motivated? What is it that signs and words have when they have meaning? These are very old questions. Language is an old topic in Western philosophy, but its importance has grown. It is not a major issue among the ancients. It begins to take on greater importance in the seventeenth century, with Hobbes and Locke. And then in the twentieth century it becomes close to obsessional. All major philosophers have their theories of language: Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Davidson, Derrida, and all manner of "deconstructionists" have made language central to their philosophical reflection.

In what we can call the modern period, from the seventeenth century, there has been a continual debate, with philosophers reacting to and feeding off each other, about the nature of language. I think we can cast light on this debate if we identify two grand types of theory. I will call the first an "enframing" theory. By this I mean that the attempt is made to understand language within the framework of a picture of human life, behavior, purposes, or mental functioning, which is itself described and defined without reference to language. Language is seen as arising in this framework, which can be variously conceived as we shall see, and fulfilling some function within it, but the framework itself precedes, or at least can be characterized independently of, language./

The other type of theory I want to call "constitutive". As this word suggests, it is the antitype of the enfaming sort. It gives us a picture of language as making possible new purposes, new levels of behavior, new meanings, and hence as not explicable within a framework picture of human life conceived without language.

These terms mark a major issue at stake between the two theories. But as it turns out, they are divided on a number of other major questions, and the two approaches can be contrasted on a number of other dimensions as well, and so they are sometimes referred to as the "designative-instrumental" and the "constitutive expressive" theories respectively. And besides this, they even end up differing on the contours and limits of what they are trying to explain, viz., language; as well as on the validity of atomistic versus holistic modes of explanation. They belong, in fact, to very different understandings of human life. But we have to enter the labyrinth at some point, and I will do so at first through this contrasting of enfaming versus constitutive, and gradually connect up with the other dimensions of controversy later.

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The classical case, and most influential first form of an enfaming theory, was the set of ideas developed from Locke through Hobbes to Condillac. I have discussed this in "Language and Human Nature."¹ Briefly, the Hobbes-Locke-Condillac (HLC) form of theory tried to understand language within the confines of the modern representational epistemology made dominant by Descartes. In the mind, there are "ideas". These are bits of putative representation of reality, much of it "external". Knowledge consists in having the representation actually square with the reality. This we can only hope to achieve if we put together our ideas according to a responsible procedure. Our beliefs about things are constructed; they result from a synthesis. The issue is whether the construction will be reliable and responsible or indulgent, slapdash, and delusory.

Language plays an important role in this construction. Words are given meaning by being attached to the things represented via the "ideas" which represent them. The introduction of words greatly facilitates the combination of ideas into a responsible picture. This facilitation is understood in

1. See Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 215–47.

different ways. For Hobbes and Locke, they allow us to grasp things in classes, and hence make possible synthesis wholesale where nonlinguistic intuition would be confined to the painstaking association of particulars. Condillac thinks that the introduction of language gives us for the first time control over the whole process of association; it affords us "dominion over our imagination" [*empire sur notre imagination*].²

The constitutive theory finds its most energetic early expression in Herder, precisely in a criticism of Condillac. In a famous passage of the treatise on the *Ursprung der Sprache*, Herder repeats Condillac's fable—one might say "just so" story—of how language might have arisen between two children in a desert.³ He professes to find something missing in this account. It seems to him to presuppose what it's meant to explain. What it's meant to explain is language, the passage from a condition in which the children emit just animal cries to the stage where they use words with meaning. The association between sign and some mental content is already there with the animal cry (what Condillac calls the "natural sign"); the prelinguistic infants, like other animals, will cry out in fear when they are faced with danger, for instance. What is new with the "instituted sign" is that the children can now use it to focus on and manipulate the associated idea, and hence direct the whole play of their imagination. The transition just amounts to their merely tumbling to the notion that the association can be used in this way.

This is the classic case of an enfaming theory. Language is understood in terms of certain elements: ideas, signs, and their association, which precede its arising. Before and after, the imagination is at work and association takes place. What's new is that now the mind is in control. Thus the cry of fear can be used to communicate the presence of danger to another, as a voluntary and not just a reflex action; as a way of designating danger, it can be used in reasonings about the antecedents and consequences of certain forms of threat.

This control itself is, of course, something that didn't exist before. But the theory establishes the maximal possible continuity between before and after. The elements are the same, combination continues, only the direction changes. We can surmise that it is precisely this continuity which

2. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 20; John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 3.3.2; Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Essai sur l'Origine des Connaissances Humaines* (Paris: Vrin, 2014), 1.2.4.45–46.

3. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Über den Ursprung der Sprache*, in Johann Gottfried Herder's *Sprachphilosophie*, ed. Erich Heintel (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1960), 12–14.

gives the theory its seeming clarity and explanatory power: language is robbed of its mysterious character and is related to elements that seem unproblematic.

Herder starts from the intuition that language makes possible a different kind of consciousness, which he calls "reflective" [*besonnen*]. That is why he finds a continuity explanation like Condillac's so frustrating and unsatisfying. The issue of what this new consciousness consists in and how it arises is not addressed, as far as Herder is concerned, by an account in terms of preexisting elements. That's why he accuses Condillac of begging the question. "The Abbot Condillac . . . had already presupposed the whole of language as invented before the first page of this book" [*Der Abt Condillac . . . hat das ganze Ding Sprache schon vor der ersten Seite seines Buchs erfunden vorausgesetzt*].⁴

What did Herder mean by 'reflection' [*Besonnenheit*]? This is harder to explain. I have tried a reconstruction in "The Importance of Herder."⁵ We might try to formulate it this way: prelinguistic beings can react to the things which surround them. But language enables us to grasp something as what it is. This explanation is hardly transparent, but it puts us on the right track. To get a clearer idea we need to reflect on what is involved in using language.

You ask me what kind of shape this is, and I say "a triangle". Let's say it is a triangle. So I get it right. But what's involved in getting it right in this sort of case? Well, it involves something like knowing that 'triangle' is the right descriptive term for this sort of thing. Perhaps I can even tell you why: "see, the thing is bounded by three straight sides". But sometimes I recognize something and I can't say very much if anything about why. I just *know* that that's a classical symphony we're hearing. Even in this case, however, I acknowledge that the question "why?" is quite in order; I can imagine working further on it and coming up with something, articulating what underlies my confidence that I've got it right.

What this brings out is that a certain understanding of the issue involved is inseparable from descriptive language, viz., that the word can be right or wrong, and that this turns on whether the described entity has certain characteristics. A being who uses descriptive language does so out of a sensitivity to issues of this range. This is a necessary proposition. We would

4. Ibid., 12.

5. See Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 79–99.

never say that a being like a parrot, to whom we can attribute no such sensitivity, was describing anything, no matter how unerringly it squawked out the "right word". Of course, as we prattle on, we are rarely focusing on the issue of rightness; we only do so when we get uncertain and are plumbing unexplored depths of vocabulary. But we are continuously responsive to rightness, and that is why we always recognize the relevance of a challenge that we have misspoken. It's this nonfocal responsiveness which I'm trying to capture with the word 'sensitivity'.

So language involves sensitivity to the issue of rightness.⁶ The rightness in the descriptive case turns on the characteristics of the described. We might call this "intrinsic rightness". To see what this amounts to, let's look at a contrast case. There are other kinds of situations in which something we can roughly call a sign can be rightly or wrongly used. Suppose I train some rats to go through the door with the triangle when this is offered as an alternative to a door with a circle. The rats get to do the right thing. The right signal behavior here is responding to the triangle positively. The rat responds to the triangle door by going through it, we might say, as I respond to the triangle by saying the word.

But now the disanalogy springs to light. What makes going through the door the right response to the triangle is that it's what brings the rats to the cheese in the end-chamber of the maze. The kind of rightness involved here is one which we can define by success in some task, here getting the cheese. Responding to the signal plays a role in completing the task, and that's why there's a "correct use" of the signal. But this is a different kind of rightness from the one involved in aligning a word with the characteristics of some described referent.

But, one might object, doesn't the rat do something analogous? Doesn't it recognize that the triangle indicates "cheese"? It is after all responding to a characteristic of the triangle door, even if an instrumental one. The rat, we might say, aligns its action with a characteristic of this door, viz., that it's the one behind which the cheese always is. So perhaps we might better "translate" his understanding by saying that the triangle indicates

6. This point is really another facet of the central intuition which underlies post-Fregean philosophy. This intuition was common to a number of different philosophers at the end of the nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth; not only Frege and Russell, but also Husserl and Meinong. The idea was that language, and the logical relations it allows, cannot be captured by an empirical science, like psychology, because it involves crucial issues of validity (*Geltung*). The "psychologism" of John Stuart Mill and other theorists of the nineteenth century who tried to reduce logic to psychology was roundly rejected.

"rush through here". But this shift in translation alerts us to what is wrong with this assimilation. There are certainly characteristics of the situation in virtue of which "rush through here" is the right response to a triangle on a door. But getting the response right has nothing to do with identifying these characteristics or any others. That's why the question, under what precise description the rat gets it right—"that's where the cheese is", or "where reward is", or "where to jump", or whatever—is pointless and inapplicable.

What this example brings out is the difference between responding appropriately in other ways to features of the situation, on one hand, and actually identifying what these features are, on the other. The latter involves giving some definition, some explicit shape, to these features. This takes us beyond merely responding to them; or, otherwise put, it is a further response of its own special kind. This is the response we carry out in words. We characteristically define the feature in applying the word, which is why this application must be sensitive to issues of intrinsic rightness, to the fact that the word applies *because* of the defined features, else it is not properly a word.⁷

By contrast, let's call what the rat responds to a 'signal', marking by this term that the response involves no definition of features, but rather rushing through to reward. Otherwise put, where responding to a signal plays a role in some task, correct signal behavior is defined by success in that task. Unless this success is itself defined in terms of getting something intrinsically right—which is not the case for winning through to cheese—correct response to the signal need involve no definition of any particular characteristics; it just involves reacting rightly, and this is compatible with recognizing a whole host of such characteristics, or none at all: the rat just knows to rush through here; it knows from nothing about descriptions and qua what it should rush it.

The rightness involved in description is crucially different. We can't just define it in terms of success in some task—unless we define this task itself

7. Nothing in our experience really corresponds to the wordless world of the rat. But we do have experiences which illustrate what it is to take the further step beyond inarticulate action. We are sometimes asked to articulate just what we have been responding to, for instance, what angers us in a person's demeanor, or why we find some scene pleasing. Being able to say something gives an explicit shape to features which were all undefined, molding our feelings and behavior. This alters our stance toward these features, and often opens up new possibilities for us. I repeat: this example is not intended to offer insight into the world of animals, because much of our world is already articulated, even when we are not focally aware of it. I will touch on this below.

in terms of what I called above intrinsic rightness. In other words, intrinsic rightness is irreducible to what we might call task rightness simpliciter: the account in terms of some task only works for language if we have already incorporated intrinsic rightness in our success criteria.⁸

We might make this distinction in another way, in terms of notions of "awareness". For a nonlinguistic animal A, being aware of X-consists of X's counting in shaping A's response. A characteristically responds to X in a certain way: if X is food, and A is hungry, A goes for it, unless deterred; if X is a predator, A flees; if X is an obstacle, A goes around it, and so on. By contrast, linguistic awareness of X can't be reduced to or equated with its triggering a particular response, or range of responses, in certain circumstances. We could think of this as an awareness which is independent from, or can sit alongside of, response triggering. But it would be better to say that awareness involves a new kind of response, linguistic recognition, which cannot be reduced to or equated with any behavioral response.

We can have this linguistic awareness even while inhibiting our standard behavioral response (I can see that you're a dangerous character, but I stop myself fleeing); or even if I make this response, linguistic recognition involves something more than so responding. Of course, other animals can also have behaviorally inert awareness of some normally arousing object if the conditions aren't right: the animal sees prey, but it is replete, and doesn't react. But in the analogous human case, there will normally be the response I'm calling linguistic recognition.

This linguistic awareness is of a different kind than the response-triggering mode; it's a more focused awareness of this object, as rightly called W. It involves a kind of gathering of attention which Herder describes as "reflection", or "*Besonnenheit*", in the passage in which he introduces this term.⁹

8. The above contrast between people describing and rats in mazes might be thought to be skewed by another obvious disanalogy between the two cases, that the person describing is emitting the signals, and the rat is only responding to them. But consider this case: certain birds are genetically constituted so that when one sights a predator it cries out, and all flee. There is a "right use" of this signal—one could imagine a case of a bird with damaged vocal cords who emitted the wrong sound, with disastrous consequences. But there is likewise no answer to the question, what precise "translation" to give to the cry: "hawk!", or "predator!", or "skedaddler!", or whatever.

9. "The human being demonstrates reflection when the force of his soul operates so freely that in the whole ocean of sensations which floods the soul through all the senses it can, so to speak, separate off, stop, and pay attention to a single wave, and be conscious of its own attentiveness. The human being demonstrates reflection when, out of the whole hovering dream of images which proceed before his senses, he can collect himself into a moment of alertness, freely dwell on a single image, pay it clear, more leisurely heed, and separate off characteristic marks for the fact that this is

To return to our example above of the rats learning how to get to cheese, we can see the possible ambiguity in the use of expressions like "knows that this is the proper door to rush through". Applied to the rat in the above example it can just mean that it knows how to respond to the signal. But in another context, we might mean something like "knows how to apply the description 'the proper door to rush through' correctly". The point of the above discussion is to show that these are very different capacities. Having the first capacity doesn't need to involve aligning any signs with reality on grounds of the features this reality displays; having the second essentially consists in acting out of sensitivity to such grounds. In the second case a certain kind of issue must be at stake, animating the behavior, and this may be quite absent in the first.

A confusion between these two bedevils a number of discussions about animal behavior, most notably the controversy about chimp "language". We can prescind from all the arguments whether the chimps really always sign in the appropriate way, concede the case to their protagonists, and still ask what is going on here. That an animal gives the sign 'banana' only in the presence of bananas, or 'want banana' only when it desires one, doesn't by itself establish what is happening. Perhaps we're dealing with a capacity of the first kind: the animal knows how to move its paws to get bananas, or attention and praise from the trainer. In fact, the sign is aligned with an object with certain features, a curved, tubular, yellow fruit. But this doesn't show that that's the point of the exercise; that the animal is responding to this issue in signing.

But only in the latter case would the chimps have "language" in something like the sense we do. In the former, we would have to see their signing behavior as more of a piece with the clever instrumental performances that we know chimps can master, like manipulating sticks, and moving boxes around to get at things out of reach, which Köhler described.¹⁰ One

that object and no other." Johann Gottfried Herder, "Treatise on the Origin of Language," in Herder: *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 87 [Der Mensch beweist Reflexion, wenn die Kraft seiner Seele so frei wirkt, daß sie in dem ganzen Ocean von Empfindungen, der sie durch alle Sinne durchbraucht, eine Welle, wenn ich so sagen darf, absondern, sie anhalten, die Aufmerksamkeit auf sie richten und sich bewußt sein kann, daß sie Sinne vorbeistreichen, sich in ein Moment des wachen sammeln, auf einem Bilde freiwillig verweilen, es in helle, ruhigere Obacht nehmen und sich Merkmale absondern kann, daß dies der Gegenstand und kein anderer sei]. Herder, *Ursprung*, 24.

10. Wolfgang Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Tübner, 1925). There is a tendency to react to any sophisticated signaling behavior by animals which seems to ap-

kind of achievement need be considered no more properly "semantic" than the other.

Whereas to be sensitive to the issue of intrinsic rightness is to be operating, as it were, in another dimension. Let me call this the "semantic dimension" (or more broadly, the "linguistic dimension"—I shall discuss the relation between these two in section 3). Then we can say that properly linguistic beings are functioning in the semantic dimension. And that can be our way of formulating Herder's point about "reflection". To be reflective is to operate in this dimension, which means acting out of sensitivity to issues of intrinsic rightness.

proach features of human language as an indication that these animals have already made up part of the gap, and are on the road to language. But many such steps can be made, whether in the "wild" or as a result of human training, without reducing the crucial distinction that Herder identified. Vervet monkeys have not just one alarm call, but three, discriminated to leopards, eagles, and snakes respectively; these each trigger off an appropriate reaction by those that hear them—climbing into trees (for leopards), and racing out of trees (for eagles). But these are simply innate responses; there is no call to speak of "reference" here, even though evolution has given these monkeys a very refined and sophisticated signaling system. Again, Duane Rumbaugh and Sue Savage-Rumbaugh trained chimps to manipulate a computer keyboard with simple lexigrams on the keys. But instead of just, say, pressing the key for banana, and getting a banana, they had to learn a combination. There were not only "object" lexigrams, like "banana", "juice", but also "verb" lexigrams, like "give". The chimps got the banana only if they pressed the combination: "give" + "banana". This was understandably very hard for the chimps to learn, and the series of trials confused them for a long time. One time in pressing "banana", they got a banana; the next time (when they failed to combine it with "give") they didn't. But eventually two chimps, Sherman and Austin, mastered it. So have the chimps mastered the combinatorial feature of human language, whereby we put together verbs and object terms? It depends on whether we think that the Herder feature is present here that the chimps are responding to intrinsic rightness, or simply task rightness. Nothing else in their behavior indicates the former. This seems to be Merlin Donald's conclusion after examining the research in this area. "In some ways, apes have come close to symbolic cognition as individuals, but they have failed completely on the cultural side of the equation. Despite the brilliant efforts of researchers such as the Rumbaughs and many others before them, apes continue to use symbols only for a pragmatic personal agenda." Donald, "The Central Role of Culture in Cognitive Evolution: A Reflection on the Myth of the 'Isolated Mind,'" in *Culture, Thought and Development*, ed. Larry P. Nucci et al. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000), 30. Or again, "the use of signing by apes is restricted to situations in which the eliciting stimulus, and the reward, are clearly specified and present, or at least very close to the ape at the time of signing." Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 152. Above all, "it is generally acknowledged that [chimpanzees and gorillas] are able to use symbols, in the critical sense that they can use them as substitutes for their own . . . But they are incapable of symbolic invention; and therefore have no natural language of their own" (ibid., 160). And a fortiori, crucial features of the human infant's learning of language are absent, like pair bonding, the invention of new words, celebratory rituals of sharing. I return to these features below in discussing human ontogeny. All this points to the conclusion that in learning to use signs, apes are responding to species of task rightness, and not to the intrinsic rightness which defines the semantic dimension. For further discussion of these phenomena, see Terence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), chapters 2 and 3. For the interesting work of the Rumbaughs, see also Stanley Greenspan and Stuart Shanker, *The First Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), chapter 3.

left anything out. ~~He~~ wouldn't have known where Herder was "coming from", just as his heirs today, the proponents of chimp language, "talking" computers, and truth-conditional theories of meaning, find the analogous objections to their views gratuitous and puzzling. That is why Herder stands at a very important divide in the understanding of language in our culture.

To appreciate this better, let's examine further what Locke and Condillac were missing, from Herder's standpoint. Their reified view of the sign didn't come from their taking the external observer's standpoint on language, as the people I have just described as their heirs do in our day. On the contrary, they wanted to explain it very much "from the inside", in terms of the agent's experience of self. They weren't trying out a behaviorist theory à la Skinner, in which linguistic rightness played no role. Rather they assumed this kind of rightness as unproblematically present. People introduced signs to "stand for" or "signify" objects (or ideas of objects), and once instituted these plainly could be rightly or wrongly applied. Their "error" from a Herderian perspective was that they never got this constitutive feature into focus.

This failure is easy, one might almost say natural, because when we speak, and especially when we coin or introduce new terms, all this is in the background. It is what we take for granted or lean on when we coin expressions, viz., that words can "stand for" things, that is, that there is for us such a thing as irreducible linguistic rightness. The failure is so "natural" that it has a venerable pedigree, as Wittgenstein showed in introducing a passage from Augustine as his paradigm for this mistake.

What is being lost from sight here is the background of our action, something we usually lean on without noticing. More particularly, what the background provides is being treated as though it were built in to each particular sign, as though we could start right off coining our first word and have this understanding of linguistic rightness already incorporated in it. Incorporating the background understanding about linguistic rightness into the individual signs has the effect of occluding it very effectively. As the background it is easy to overlook anyway; once we build it into the particular signs, we bar the way to recognizing it altogether.

This is a fault of any designative theory of meaning. But the reification wrought by modern epistemology since Descartes and Locke, that is, the drive to objectify our thoughts and "mental contents", if anything made it worse. The furniture of the mind was accorded a thing-like existence, something objects can have independent of any background. The occluding of

Herder's theory of language is holistic in the way that the traditional view he was criticizing was not. Indeed, it is holistic in more than one way; but at the moment I want to stress that one cannot enter the linguistic dimension by the acquisition of a single word. Entering this dimension, being able to focus on objects by recognizing them, creates, as it were, a new space around us. Instead of being overcome by the ocean of sensations as they rush by us, we are able to distinguish one wave, and hold it in clear, calm attention. It is this new space of attention, of distance from the immediate instinctual significance of things, of focused awareness, as I described it above, which Herder wants to call "reflection."¹¹

This is what he finds missing in Condillac's account. Condillac does have a more sophisticated idea of the move from animal to human signs than Locke. Animals respond to natural and "accidental" signs (e.g., smoke is an "accidental" sign of fire, and clouds of rain). Humans have also "instigated" signs. The difference lies in the fact that by means of these latter humans can control the flow of their own imagination, whereas animals passively follow the connections which are triggered off in them by the chain of events.¹²

There is obviously some link between Herder's description of our interrupting the "ocean of sensations" and this Condillaquian idea of taking control. But what is still missing in the French thinker is any sense that the link between sign and object might be fundamentally different when one crosses the divide. It is still conceived in a very reified way, typical of the followers of Locke, a connection which is there in a thing-like fashion, such that the only issue allowed is whether it drives us or we drive it. Condillac belongs to the mode of thought which conceives language as an instrument, a set of connections which we can use to construct or control things. The point of language is to give us "*empire sur notre imagination*."¹³ Locke is the great source of this reifying language. He often uses images of construction out of materials when speaking of the mind.¹⁴ That a wholly different issue about rightness arises escapes him.

To raise this issue is to swing our perspective on language into a quite new angle. But this issue is easy to miss. Condillac was unaware that he had

11. Herder, *Ursprung*, 24–25.

12. Condillac, *L'Origine des Connaissances*, 1.1.4.45.

13. "dominion over our imagination"; *ibid.*, 1.2.4.45–46.

14. See Locke, *Essay*, 2.2.2.

the background understanding of the linguistic dimension by incorporating it into reified mental contents prepared the way for an elision of it altogether in those modern behaviorist and semi-behaviorist theories which try to explain thought and language strictly from the standpoint of the external observer. The associations of thing-like ideas were easily transposed into the stimulus-response connections of classical behaviorism. An obvious line of filiation runs from Locke through Helvétius to Watson and Skinner.

In this context, we can see that any effort to retrieve the background had to run against the grain of this important component of modern culture, the epistemology which was most easily associated with the scientific revolution. In fact, some of what we now recognize as the most important developments in philosophy in the last two centuries have been tending toward this retrieval, culminating in the twentieth century in different ways in the work of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, to name the most celebrated variants. If I consider Herder a hinge figure, it is because he had an important place as one of the origin points of this counterthrust, in particular in relation to our understanding of language. This is not to say that he went all the way to this retrieval. On the contrary, as we shall see later on, he often signally failed to draw the conclusions implicit in the new perspective he adopted; but he did play a crucial role in opening this perspective.

There have been two very common, and related, directions of argument in this counterthrust, both of which can be illustrated in Herder's views on language. The first consists in articulating a part of the background in such a form that our reliance on it in our thought, or perception, or experience, or understanding language, becomes clear and undeniable. The background so articulated is then shown to be incompatible with crucial features of the received doctrine in the epistemological tradition. We can find this type of argument with Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Merleau-Ponty in the twentieth century. But the pioneer in this kind of argument, in whose steps all the others have followed, is Kant.

The arguments of the transcendental deduction can be seen in a number of different lights. But one way to take them is as a final laying to rest of a certain atomism of the input which had been espoused by empiricism. As this came to Kant through Hume, it seemed to be suggesting that the original level of knowledge of reality (whatever that turned out to be) came in particulate bits, individual "impressions". This level of information could be isolated from a later stage in which these bits were connected together, for example in beliefs about cause-effect relations. We

find ourselves forming such beliefs, but we can, by taking a stance of reflexive scrutiny which is fundamental to the modern epistemology, separate the basic level from these too hasty conclusions we leap to. This analysis allegedly reveals, for instance, that nothing in the phenomenal field corresponds to the necessary connection we too easily interpolate between "cause" and "effect".¹⁵

Kant undercuts this whole way of thinking by showing that it supposes, for each particulate impression, that it is being taken as a bit of potential information. It purports to be about something. This is the background understanding which underpins all our perceptual discriminations. The primitive distinction recognized by empiricists between impressions of sensation and those of reflection amounts to an acknowledgment of this. The buzzing in my head is discriminated from the noise I hear from the neighboring woods, in that the first is a component in how I feel, and the second seems to tell me something about what's happening out there (my neighbor is using his chain saw again). So even a particulate "sensation", really to be sensation (in the empiricist sense, that is, as opposed to reflection), has to have this dimension of "aboutness". This will later be called "intentionality", but Kant speaks of the necessary relation to an object of knowledge. "Now we find that our thought of the relation of all knowledge to its object carries with it an element of necessity" [*Wir finden aber, dass unser Gedanke von der Beziehung aller Erkenntnis auf ihren Gegenstand etwas von Notwendigkeit bei sich führet*].¹⁶

With this point secured, Kant argues that this relationship to an object would be impossible if we really were to take the impression as an utterly isolated content, without any link to others. To see it as about something is to place it somewhere, at the minimum out in the world, as against in me, to give it a location in a world which, while it is in many respects indeterminate and unknown for me, cannot be wholly so. The unity of this world is presupposed by anything which could present itself as a particulate bit of "information", and so whatever we mean by such a particulate bit, it couldn't be utterly without relation to all others. The background condition for this favorite supposition of empiricist philosophy, the simple impression,

15. David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), chapter 7.

16. The reference in the by now canonical form is to A 104 of the first edition of Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, in the Berlin Academy edition, in *Kants Werke*, vol. IV (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968). For English version see Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan Education, 1989), A 104.

forbids us giving it the radical sense which Hume seemed to propose for it. To attempt to violate this background condition is to fall into incoherence. Really to succeed in breaking all links between individual impressions would be to lose all sense of awareness of anything. "These perceptions would not then belong to any experience, consequently would be without an object, merely a blind play of representations, less even than a dream" [*Diese <sc. Wahrnehmungen> würden aber alsdann auch zu keiner Erfahrung gehören, folglich ohne Objekt und nichts als ein blindes Spiel der Vorstellungen, d.i. weniger als ein Traum sein*].¹⁷

So Kant by articulating the background understanding of aboutness sweeps away the empiricist atomism of experience. ~~N~~ I want to suggest that Herder does something analogous. By articulating the background understanding of the linguistic dimension, he also undercuts and transforms the designative theory of language dominant in his day. And to make the parallel closer, one of the features swept away is precisely its atomism, the view that language is a collection of independently introduced words. I will return to this shortly.

The second main direction of argument in the counterthrust to Cartesianism or empiricism has been the attempt to place our thinking in the context of our form of life. The original early modern epistemologies gave a notoriously disengaged picture of thinking.¹⁸ This was no accident. The foundationalist drive, the attempt to lay bare a clear structure of inference on the basis of original preinterpreted bits of evidence, pushed toward a disengagement from embodied thinking, and the assumptions buried in everyday custom.¹⁹ The move toward a more situated understanding of thinking is evident enough in the work of Wittgenstein and Heidegger. But Herder is one of its pioneers. He constantly stresses that we have to understand human reason and language as an integral part of our life form.

17. *Ibid.*, A 112.

18. See, for instance, Elizabeth Anscombe, who argues, "Can it be that there is something that modern philosophy has blankly misunderstood: namely what ancient and medieval philosophers meant by practical knowledge? Certainly in modern philosophy we have an *incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge*." Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 57, emphasis added.

19. For the suspicion toward unthinking custom, see Locke, *Essay*, 1.2.22.6. I have discussed this connection between disengagement and modern epistemology at greater length in "Overcoming Epistemology" in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1-19; in *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), chapter 9; and in "Lichtung" or "Lebensform": Parallels between Wittgenstein and Heidegger" in *Philosophical Arguments*, 61-78.

They cannot be seen as forming a separate faculty which is just added on to our animal nature "like the fourth rung of a ladder on top of the three lower ones." We think like the kind of animals we are, and our animal functions (desire, sensibility, etc.) are those of rational beings: "in every case the whole, undivided soul takes effect" [*überall . . . wirkt die ganze ungeteilte Seele*].²⁰

These two directions, retrieving the background and situating our thinking, are obviously closely interwoven. In fact, it is the firm belief in situated thinking which leads Herder to his articulation of the linguistic dimension. Just because he cannot see language/reason as a mere add-on to our animal nature, he is led to ask what kind of transformation of our psychic life as a whole attends the rise of language. It is this question to which "reflection" is an answer. ~~N~~ To see our thinking as situated makes us see it as one mode among other possible forms of psychic life. And it is this which makes us aware of its distinctive background.

It is by embarking on these two related directions of argument that Herder brings about a rotation of our thought about language, so that we see it from a new angle. A good illustration of this is Herder's grasp of holism. One of the most important, and universally recognized, consequences of Herder's discovery was a certain kind of holism of meaning. A word only has meaning within a lexicon and a context of language practices, which are ultimately embedded in a form of life. Wittgenstein's is the most celebrated formulation of a thesis of this kind in our day.

This insight flows from the recognition of the linguistic dimension as Herder formulated it. Once you articulate this bit of our background understanding, an atomism of meaning becomes as untenable as the parallel atomism of perceptions does after Kant. The connection can be put in the following way:

To possess a word of human language is to have some sense that it's the right word, to be sensitive, we said above, to this issue of its irreducible rightness. Unlike the rat who learns to run through the door with the red triangle, I can use the word 'triangle'. That means that I can not only respond to the corresponding shape, but can recognize it as a triangle. But to be able to recognize something as a triangle is to be able to recognize other things as nontriangles. For the description 'triangle' to have a sense

20. Herder, "Origin of Language," 83; Herder, *Ursprung*, 21. *

The undivided soul
is a structure
of the animal nature

for me, there must be something(s) with which it contrasts; I must have some notion of other kinds of figures. 'Triangle' has to contrast in my lexicon with other figure terms. But in addition, to recognize something as a triangle is to focus on a certain property dimension; it is to pick the thing out by its shape, and not by its size, color, composition, smell, aesthetic properties, etc. Here again, some kind of contrast is necessary.

Now at least some of these contrasts and connections we have to be able to *articulate*. Someone can't really be recognizing 'triangle' as the right word if they have absolutely no sense of what makes it the right word; for instance, if they don't even grasp that something is a triangle in virtue of its shape, not its size or color. And one cannot have any sense of this, if one cannot say *anything* whatever, even under probing and prompting. There are cases, of course, where we cannot articulate the particular features peculiar to something we recognize, for example a certain emotional reaction to something, or an unusual hue. But we know to say that it is a feeling or a color. And we can state its ineffability. The zone where our descriptions give out is situated in a context of words. If we couldn't say any of this: even that it was a feeling, couldn't even say that it was indescribable, we couldn't be credited with linguistic consciousness at all; and if we did utter some sound, it couldn't be described as a word. We would be out of the linguistic dimension altogether.²¹

In other words, a being who just emitted a sound when faced with a given object, but was incapable of saying why, that is, showed no sign of having any sense that this is the (irreducibly) right word, other than emitting the sound, would have to be deemed to be merely responding to signals, like the animals I described earlier. (Think of the parrot.)

What flows from this is that a descriptive word, like 'triangle', couldn't figure in our lexicon alone. It has to be surrounded by a skein of terms, some which contrast with it, and some which situate it, place it in its property dimension, not to speak of the wider matrix of languages in which the various activities are situated where our talk of triangles figures: measurement, geometry, design; and where description itself figures as one kind of speech act among others.

This is what the holism of meaning amounts to: that individual words can only be words within the context of an articulated language. Language

21. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 93.

is not something which could be built up one word at a time. Mature linguistic capacity just doesn't come like this, and couldn't; because each word supposes a whole of language to give it its full force as a word, that is, as an expressive gesture which places us in the linguistic dimension. At the moment when infants start to say their "first word", they are certainly on the road to full human speech, but this "first word" is quite different from a single word within developed speech. The games the infant plays with this word express and realize a quite different stance to the object than the adult descriptive term. It's not a building block out of many of which adult language is gradually built. I shall return to this below.

But this exactly was the error of the traditional designative view. For Condillac, a one-word lexicon was quite conceivable. His children acquire first one word, then others. They build language up, term by term. That's because Condillac ignores the background understanding necessary for language; rather, he builds it unremarked into the individual words. But Herder's articulation of the real nature of linguistic understanding shows this to be impossible. Herder rightly says in the passage I quoted earlier that Condillac presupposes "*das ganze Ding Sprache*."²²

This expression seems happily to capture the holistic nature of the phenomenon. And yet, here too, Herder disappoints in the conclusions he actually draws in his passage on the birth of language. His "just so" story after all tells us of the birth of a single word. And at the end of it, he unfortunately throws in the following rhetorical question: "What is the whole of human language but a collection of such words" [*was ist die ganze menschliche Sprache als eine Sammlung solcher Worte*]?²³ And yet I'd like to credit him again with putting us on the track to holism. Not only because it is clearly implicit in what he did articulate; but also because he himself made part of the mediating argument.

He sees that the recognition of something as something, the recognition which allows us to coin a descriptive term for it, requires that we single out a distinguishing mark [*Merkmal*]. The word for X is the right word in virtue of something. Without a sense of what makes it the right word, there is no sense of a word as right. "Distinctly in an immediate way, without a distinguishing mark? No sensuous creature can have outer sensation in this way, since it must always suppress, so to speak destroy, other feelings, and

22. "the whole of language."

23. Herder, "Origin of Language," 89; Herder, *Ursprung*, 25.

must always recognize the difference between two things through a third thing" [*Deutlich unmittelbar, ohne Merkmal? so kann kein sinnliches Geschöpf ausser sich empfinden, da es immer andere Gefühle unterdrücken, gleichsam vernichten und immer den Unterschied von zweien durch ein drittes erkennen muss*].²⁴

So Herder's articulation of the linguistic dimension, properly understood, and as he began to work it out, shows the classical designative story of the acquisition of language to be in principle impossible. This story involves in a sense a deep confusion between the mere signal and the word. For there *can* be one-signal repertoires. You can train a dog to respond to a single command, and then add another one, and later another one. In your first phase, whatever isn't your one signal isn't a signal at all. But there can't be one-word lexica. What's because getting it right for a signal is just responding appropriately. Getting it right for a word requires more, a kind of recognition: we are in the linguistic dimension.

The holism of meaning has been one of the most important ideas to emerge from Herder's new perspective. Humboldt took it up in his image of language as a web.²⁵ And it took its most influential form early in the last century in the celebrated principle of Saussure: "in language there are only differences without positive terms" [*dans la langue il n'y a que des différences sans termes positifs*].²⁶ What this slogan means is that we can't understand linguistic meaning as an alignment of sounds (words) and things; rather we align differences in sound with differences in signification. So in English the distinction in sound between "b" and "p" yields in a given context the distinction in sense between "but" and "put". In other words, a term gets its meaning only in the field of its contrasts. In this

24. Herder, "Origin of Language," 89; Herder, *Ursprung*, 25.

25. "Language can be compared to an immense web, in which every part stands in a more or less clearly recognizable connection with the others, and all with the whole. Whatever his point of departure, man always makes contact in speaking with a merely isolated portion of this fabric, but invariably does so instinctively, as if everything this one portion must necessarily agree with were simultaneously present to him at the same moment." Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language: The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and Its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind*, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 69. [*Man kann die Sprache mit einem ungeheuren Gewebe vergleichen in dem jeder Teil mit dem anderen und all mit dem ganzen in mehr oder weniger deutlich erkennbaren Zusammenhänge stehen. Der Mensch berührt im Sprechen, von welchen Beziehungen man ausgehen mag, immer nur ein abgeordneten Teil des Gewebes, tut dies aber instinktiartig immer dergestalt, als wären ihm zugleich alle, mit welchem jener einzelne notwendig in Übereinstimmung stehen muß, in gleichen Augenblick gegenwärtig*]; Humboldt, *Schriften zur Sprache*, ed. Michael Bühler (Stuttgart: Reklam 1995), 65.

26. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 120; Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (Paris: Payot, 1978), 166.

form, the principle has achieved virtually universal acceptance. It is an axiom of linguistics.

Humboldt's image of the web brings out the fact that our grasp of any single word is always situated within our grasp of the language as a whole, and the multiple rules and connections that define it. So when we coin a new verb, and by adding "-ed" put it in the past tense, everyone understands what is being said; and thus also, we have for any word some notion of how it relates to others, for instance, what combination with others in a proposition would make sense, as we see from the paradigm of absurdity which Chomsky made widely familiar: "colorless green ideas sleep furiously". In another famous image, Humboldt likens the mention of a word to the touching of a note in a keyboard instrument. This resonates through the whole instrument.²⁷

But perhaps its most powerful application in philosophy is in the work of late Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's devastating refutation of "Augustine's" designative theory of meaning constantly recurs to the background understanding which we need to draw on to speak and understand. Where the traditional theory sees a word acquiring meaning by being used to name some object or idea, and its meaning as then communicated through ostensive definition, Wittgenstein points out the background of language which these simple acts of naming and pointing presuppose.²⁸ Our words only have the meaning they have within the "language games" we play with them, and these in turn find their context in a whole form of life.²⁹

This holism of meaning is inextricably connected to the fact that human beings as linguistic animals also live in a bigger world, which goes beyond

27. Humboldt, "Schriften zur Sprache," 138–39.

28. See, for instance, Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 92.

29. There is an important link between this holistic point and that which Brandom makes central in *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994) and other works. Brandom rejects the atomism of the empiricist tradition, that one could first take in one piece of information, and then another, then link them, and see the correlation; and hence make inferences. This process doesn't make sense for Brandom. How could we take in an isolated piece of information? What sense could we make of such an isolated bit of information? Well what sense do we make of it? Elder says: "go, Scout, and see if there are any tiger tracks." Scout comes back: "Elder, I saw a paw track in the sand!" That's a particulate bit, but it makes sense here within our whole general grasp of our situation, which includes forest, tigers, the consequent danger of being eaten, our collaborative efforts to avoid this and other dangers, and so on. This bit is relevant because it will license multiple inferences, practical and factual. Included among the former would be here: "Let's not go there now." So Brandom's opening move in *Making It Explicit* is absolutely crucial. He de-thrones representation as the primary building block of thought and language. What is crucial is inferences.

the episodic present. Their present experience is accompanied invariably by the sense that it was preceded by a personal and social history; that it will be followed by a future; and that what happens in their immediate predicament takes place in a broader context of space. Indeed, we can say that humans live not only in the immediate situation, but also in a vast cosmos or universe, stretching out in time and space from our momentary surroundings. The further reaches of this cosmos may have been more conjectured or imagined than known for much of human history, the product of myth and wild surmise; but this larger context is inescapable.

But the broader context is also social: we live among relatives, and in a village, perhaps also a nation. Within these contexts, familial or societal, we interact with people through different roles; we carry on different activities, which create different contexts. All this is captured in language, for instance the language of kinship, that of the different political and social positions—police officer, doctor, president; that of different activities and spheres—like the political, the economic, the religious, entertainment, and so on. It is not just that these roles, spheres, relations wouldn't be possible without language (I will return to this point later on). It is also that the holism of language means that we cannot but have a sense of how these roles and spheres are meant to relate to each other: how some are distinct from others, for example parent and child; or a context of serious negotiation versus one of play, or work as against recreation, and so on. To learn the language of society is to take on some imaginary of how society works and acts, of its history through time; of its relation to what is outside: nature, or the cosmos, or the divine.

But my principal point here is not that these words for roles, relations, activities, spheres, allow each of these severally to be part of our world, but rather the holistic point that our language for them situates them in relation to each other, as contrasting or alternating, or partially interpenetrating. To grasp them in language *is* to have some sense of how they relate. This relationality may be more or less articulate in one or other of its aspects, may be more or less clearly defined. But some sense of it is always present in human life *qua* linguistic.³⁰

This is part of what Heidegger wanted to evoke in his famous phrase about language as the “house of being.” A house is an environment in which

30. See the interesting discussion on language and “lexification” in Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), chapter 5.

things are arranged by our action and design, different rooms for different uses, for different people, or different times; or for storing different kinds of things; and the like. So the way in which the language we speak at a given time relates things, disposes of them, is seen as a kind of active arrangement. Such a relating is essential to language.³¹

But what gives especial force to this image is our seeing this disposition as one of different human meanings. Our sense of the meanings of things in their different dimensions is carried in our language. But what might make us uneasy with this expression is the fact that we have developed uses of language which allow description and explanation of things which are no longer characterized in terms of human meaning: paradigmatically, post-Galilean natural science. As one activity among many, this is within the “house”, but as a vision of reality it takes us beyond the “house”; it presents a universe which is “unhoused” in any arrangements of human meanings.

So as human beings we live inescapably in a larger social, and even cosmic, context. The reflection seems obvious that only beings with language can live in this kind of context, because it takes language to have an idea, however wild, of what doesn't and cannot impinge on our immediate situation. But the real point is that as linguistic, we cannot but so live in a wider world.

This holism of language has another facet. To have linguistic awareness is to be constantly encountering its limits. We know that we can say certain things easily. For instance, we can answer certain questions right off: “when did you last see him?”—“yesterday”; “what kind of a tree is

31. Possessing a language is having a liminal sense of a great constellation of such ordered distinctions, some already articulated for us, some not yet expressed: kinds of animals; kinds of furniture; houses/stores/office blocks; then inside (buildings in general) versus outside; field/forest; then also bigger domains: living/inanimate; on earth/in the sky; now/past/future. Then there is the social domain: kin versus others; various social roles. Then there is the domain of feelings: liking/disliking, love/indifference; pride/shame, and the like. Then there are the grammatical forms and combinations: things and their properties, as above; objects and processes, agents and actions. The liminal access to these distinctions underpins my capacity to speak, and helps constitute my sense of this capacity; that is, my sense of what I can say, and what is (as yet) beyond my ability to articulate. I can tell you that that picture is of a storm at sea, but I can't find a way of describing the conflicting emotions it arouses in me. Different languages and cultures carry with them different such constellations of distinctions: each proposes its own order, its own way of “housing” Being, to use Heidegger's metaphor. And at the same time, each of these orders evolves and changes, and in the present language there are always hints and reminders of its past. Some terms have an archaic ring to them; some modes of address have a formality and solemnity which is inseparable from their venerable origin in earlier times (Your Majesty, Your Honor). See the discussion in John Richardson, *Heidegger* (New York: Routledge, 2012), chapter 8.

that?"—"an oak". But sometimes when people ask: "why did you do that?", or "what were you feeling?", or "why do you dislike that painting?", we can be at a loss. In these cases, part of the problem may be our own (often motivated) opaqueness to ourselves. But it can be that we just lack the terms. The city dweller might even be at a loss if asked what kind of tree he's standing under.

We not only have this sense of what we can and cannot (easily) say; we are often motivated to extend our range of articulacy. We might get the city dweller interested in examining leaf forms, kinds of bark, and so on, so that he would easily come to distinguish oaks from elms. Or we might be induced to a more self-transformative reflection, and come to a deeper understanding of our motives, our affinities and repugnances. Expanding articulacy can regestalt our experience in a rather minimal way by learning to distinguish elms and oaks, but more profoundly when we come to distinguishing different kinds of love and what they involve and hence come to read our relationships and their tensions and conflicts in a quite different fashion.

This kind of change is analogous, on a more abstract and objectified level, to our changing our mode of scientific enquiry by shifting paradigms. Here it's not just a matter of adding words, but of taking on new models, and recognizing previously unseen patterns.

Self-understanding, and human understanding in general, can also be enhanced by coming to recognize new models; and that is why literature is such a source of insight. Balzac in *Les Chouans* paints a portrait of a miser [avaré] through a chain of actions, words, and responses which reveal the pattern of obsession which defines this type for him.³²

Humboldt shows the importance of this boundary between the sayable and what lies beyond, as well as our recurrent desire to push this boundary back, and expand our zone of articulacy. On a more banal level, we are often forced to find new words for what we have to say, as when our interlocutor says: "I can't understand you, can you explain it differently?" But Humboldt sees us as pushed further, to open up to speech areas which were previously ineffable. Certainly poets are embarked on this enterprise: T. S. Eliot speaks of "raids on the inarticulate."³³ Humboldt, for his part, posits a drive [*Trieb*] "to couple everything felt by the soul [mind] with a sound"

32. Honoré de Balzac, *Les Chouans* (Paris: Gallimard, Folio Classique, 1972), 240-56.

33. T. S. Eliot, "No. 2: East Coker," in *Four Quartets*, section 5.

[alles, was die Seele empfindet, mit dem Laut zu verknüpfen].³⁴ I will return to this drive, and the ways in which we make inroads into the hitherto unsayable, in Chapter 6.

4

But we need to extend somewhat our notion of the semantic dimension. In fact, we should speak now of the linguistic dimension, because the semantic is only one of the facets or uses of language. Above I was speaking of descriptive rightness. But we do more things in language than describe. There are other ways in which a word can be "*le mot juste*". For instance, I come up with a word to articulate my feelings, and thus at the same time shape them in a certain manner. This is a function of language which cannot be reduced to simple description, at least not description of an independent object. Or else I say something which reestablishes the contact between us, puts us once again on a close and intimate footing. We need a broader concept of intrinsic rightness than just that involved in aligning words with objects.

We can get a more general description if we recur to a contrast I made above. The correct response to a signal for a rat trained in a maze was defined, I said, by success in some task. Let's use the word 'sign' as a general term which can apply indiscriminately to this kind of case as well as to genuine uses of language. Then we can say that functioning with signs lies outside the linguistic dimension wherever the right response is defined simply in terms of what leads to success in some nonlinguistically defined task. Where this account is not sufficient, the behavior falls within the dimension.

Rats responding to triangles, and birds responding with cries to the presence of predators, meet this criterion. An account in terms of a simple task suffices. Where it fails to, we enter the linguistic dimension. This can happen in two ways. First the task itself can be defined in terms of intrinsic rightness; for instance, where what we are trying to do is describe some scene correctly. Or else, where the end is something like articulating our feelings, or reestablishing contact, the failure occurs at another point. As goals, these don't on the face of it seem to involve intrinsic rightness.

34. Humboldt, "On Language," 157; Humboldt, "Schriften zur Sprache," 146. This is the drive to produce what Merleau-Ponty describes as "*parole parlantes*"; see note 39.

But the way in which the correct sign behavior contributes to fulfilling them does.

Thus when I hit on the right word to articulate my feelings, and acknowledge that I am motivated by envy, say, the term does its work because it is the right term. In other words, we can't explain the rightness of the word 'envy' here simply in terms of the condition that using it produces; rather we have to account for its producing this condition—here, a successful articulation—in terms of its being the right word. A contrast case should make this clearer. Say that every time I get stressed out, tense and cross-pressured, I take a deep breath, and blow it explosively out of my mouth, 'how!' I immediately feel calmer and more serene. This is plainly the "right sound" to make, as defined by this desirable goal of restored equilibrium. The rightness of 'how!' admits of a simple task account. It's like the rat case and the bird case, except that it doesn't involve directing behavior across different organisms, and therefore doesn't look like "communication". (But imagine that every time you feel cross-pressured, I go 'how!', and that restores your serenity.) That's because we can explain the rightness simply in terms of its bringing about calm, and don't need to explain its bringing about calm in terms of rightness.

This last clause points out the contrast with 'envy' as the term which articulates/clarifies my feelings. It brings about this clarification, to be sure, and that's essential to its being the right word here. But central to its clarifying is its being the right word. So we can't just explain its rightness by its *de facto* resolving, say, the state of painful confusion I was in. You can't simply make this *de facto* causal outcome criterial for its rightness, because you don't know whether it's clarifying unless you know that it's the right term. Whereas in the case of 'how!', all there was to its rightness was its having the desired outcome; the bare *de facto* consequence is criterial. That's why normally we wouldn't be tempted to treat this expletive as though it had a meaning.

Something similar can be said about my restoring the intimacy between us by saying "I'm sorry". This was "the right thing to say", because it restored contact. But at the same time, we can say that these words are efficacious in restoring contact because of what they mean. Intrinsic rightness enters into the account here, because what the words mean can't be defined by what they bring about. Again, we might imagine that I could also set off a loud explosion in the neighborhood, which would so alarm you that you would forget about our tiff and welcome my presence. This would

then be, from a rather cold-blooded, strategic point of view, the "right move". But the explosion "means" nothing.

What this discussion is moving us toward is a definition of the linguistic dimension in terms of the (im)possibility of a reductive account of rightness. A simple task account of rightness for some sign reduces it to a matter of efficacy for some nonlinguistic purpose. We are in the linguistic dimension when this kind of reduction cannot work, when a kind of rightness is at issue which can't be cashed out in this way. That's why the image of a new "dimension" seems to me apposite. Sometimes the rightness is a matter of correct description, and then we can speak of the "semantic" dimension. But linguistic rightness is more multifaceted than can be captured by semantics alone.

To move from nonlinguistic to linguistic agency is to move to a world in which a new kind of issue is at play, a right use of signs which is not reducible to task rightness. The world of the agent has a new axis on which to respond; its behavior can no longer be understood just as the purposive seeking of ends on the old plane. It is now responding to a new set of demands. Hence the image of a new dimension.³⁵

Condillac as we saw missed this dimension. And what perhaps contributed to this occlusion was his starting point in his account of the origin of language. His explanation begins with "natural signs", things like cries of pain or distress. Their right use in communication could only be construed on the simple task model. Language arose supposedly when people learned to use the connection already established by the natural sign, between say, the cry and what caused the distress, in a controlled way. The "instituted sign" is born, an element of language properly speaking. Herder, as we just saw, cannot accept that the transition from prelanguage to language consists simply in a taking control of a preexisting process. What this leaves out is precisely that a new dimension of issues becomes relevant, that the agent is operating on a new plane. Hence in the same passage in which he declares Condillac's account circular, Herder reaches for a definition of this new dimension, with his term 'reflection'.

On my reconstruction, Herder's 'reflection' is to be glossed as the semantic (and more generally, the linguistic) dimension, and his importance is that he made this central to any account of language. Moreover,

35. Hence also my use of the word 'intrinsic'. This is a dangerous word, which triggers often unreflective reactions from pragmatists, non-realists, and other such idealists. Its point here is simply to serve as an anonym to 'capable of reductive explanation'.

Herder's conception of this dimension was multifaceted, along the lines of the broad conception of rightness above. It didn't just involve description. Herder saw that opening this dimension has to transform all aspects of the agent's life. It will also be the seat of new emotions. Linguistic beings are capable of new feelings which affectively reflect their richer sense of their world: not just anger, but indignation; not just desire, but love and admiration. For human beings an emotional response is inseparable from a certain characterization of the situation which elicits it. But linguistic beings can be sensitive to distinctions which are lost on prelinguistic animals. Important among these are distinctions involving moral or other values. Prelinguistic animals treat something as desirable or repugnant by going after it or avoiding it. But only language beings can identify things as worthy of desire or aversion. For such identifications raise issues of intrinsic rightness. They involve a characterization of things which is not reducible simply to the ways we treat them as objects of desire or aversion. They involve a recognition beyond that, that they ought to be treated in one or another way. So we may ascribe anger to a nonhuman animal, but indignation requires the recognition that the object of our ire has done something wrong, unconscionable. To admire someone is more than being impressed by them, it is experiencing them as having exceptional virtues, or achievements.

Being in the linguistic dimension not only enables a new kind of awareness of the things which surround us, but also a more refined sense of human meanings, and hence a more complex gamut of emotions. And in this domain, unlike in that of purely external objects, a changed or clarified understanding of meanings will mean a changed or clarified emotion. That is why, in my example above, when I come to see that I am actuated by envy, my feelings characteristically change.

The linguistic dimension also made human agents capable of new kinds of relations, new sorts of footings that they can stand on with each other, of intimacy and distance, hierarchy and equality. Gregarious apes may have (what we call) a "dominant male", but only language beings can distinguish between leader, king, president, and the like. Animals mate and have offspring, but only language beings define kinship. And it is obvious that our understanding of footings and relations, like our vocabulary of feelings, is deeply intricately in our grasp of value, moral or other.

This discussion brings us back to the central thesis that I want to draw out of Herder, the one that justifies the label 'constitutive'. I have been arguing

above that operating in the linguistic dimension is an essential condition of counting as a being which uses language in the full sense. No language without linguistic dimension of irreducible rightness. But the crucial Herderian thesis also inverts this relation: no linguistic dimension without language. This may seem a trivial consequence of the way I have set up this discussion. If we define the linguistic dimension as sensitivity to certain issues concerning the (intrinsic) right use of signs, then it follows tautologically that it requires language to be.

But the point I'm trying to make here goes well beyond tautology. The claim is that our sensitivity to these issues of rightness arises out of and along with our ability to express it. This sensitivity is articulated in certain responses, including the various uses of words and articulate speech; but also, as we shall discuss more fully below, gesture, mimicry, the fashioning of images and symbols, and the like. This range of expressive activities, as we can call them, serves not only to communicate this sensitivity to others. The articulation serves just as much and equiprimordially to realize this sensitivity in ourselves. This is at the core of Herder's "expressivism".

Here he inaugurates a theme which has been developed in recent times by Merleau-Ponty. In his chapter on language in *La Phénoménologie de la Perception*, Merleau-Ponty focuses on what seems the mystery of new expression, and the creation of new meanings. We see what happens with gestures. A new gesture, or a style of moving and acting in our surroundings, can express and thus reveal the possibility of a new way of being, conferring new meanings on the things which surround us. There might be someone whose whole stance, way of looking, way of responding to the scene expresses a sensitivity to the beauty in the fine detail of this landscape, or flower bed, or building. This might be our introduction to this kind of sensibility as a human possibility. On the other side, we have a man whose whole demeanor expresses bluff, no-nonsense concern for the business at hand; and this might also be our introduction into this stance as a possibility.

We can see here how new gestures can express by enacting new ways of being, and make visible new significances that things can have for us. The necessary condition for this innovation is that we and our teachers in each such case are familiar with a certain "vocabulary" of gestures and meanings, against the background of which these new meanings emerge.

Merleau-Ponty want us to see language innovation as fundamentally continuous with gestural invention of this kind, and of the same order. A new expression reveals a new way of inhabiting the world, and the new

significances which this way responds to. A metaphor like Mallarmé's "the sky is dead" [*le ciel est mort*]³⁶ opens for us a new significance of our world and the desolate response which it provokes. Or as Merleau-Ponty puts it: "Speech is a gesture, and its signification is a world" [*la parole est un geste et sa signification un monde*].³⁷ Or a few pages later: "we must begin by placing thought back among the phenomena of expression" [*il faut commencer par replacer la pensée parmi les phénomènes d'expression*].³⁸

These innovations then take their place among the sedimented meanings which will enable us to grasp other innovations. These original creations are examples of "*une parole parlante*", as against "*une parole parlée*."³⁹

Seeing the linguistic dimension as constituted by expression came naturally to Herder. It emerged from his understanding of linguistic thought as situated, which we discussed in the previous section. Reflection arises in an animal form that is already dealing with the world around it. Language comes about as a new, "reflective" stance toward things. It arises among our earlier nonlinguistic stances toward objects of desire, or of fear, or to things which figure as obstacles, supports, and the like. Our stances to these things are literally bodily attitudes or actions on or toward objects. The new stance can't be in its origins entirely unconnected with bodily posture or action. But it can't be an action just like the others, whose point is definable outside the linguistic dimension. It has to be seen rather as an "expressive" action, one which both actualizes this stance of reflection, and also presents it to others in public space. It brings about the stance whereby we relate to things in the linguistic dimension.

Speech is the expression of thought. But it isn't simply an outer clothing for what could exist independently. It is constitutive of reflective, that is, linguistic thought, of thought which deals with its objects in the linguistic dimension. Later we can detach our thinking over some of its extent from public expression, and even from natural language. But our power to function in the linguistic dimension is tied for its everyday uses, as well as its origins, to expressive speech, as the range of actions in which it is not only communicated, but realized.

36. From the poem "L'Azur."

37. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 190. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 214.

38. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 196; Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie*, 222.

39. Landes translates these terms as "speaking speech" and "spoken speech". See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 202; Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie*, 229.

This doctrine is obviously contested, first by those who have remained tied to the "intellectualism" of the old disengaged epistemology, but also surprisingly enough by some thinkers who have explicitly built on post-Herderian themes, for instance Jacques Derrida.⁴⁰ It has, however, been central to those who have tried to give a picture of human agency as embodied.⁴¹ But can we attribute it to Herder? One can contest this, because Herder himself doesn't seem to take the point in the very passage about the birth of language I quoted above. Instead of stressing the crucial role of overt expression, he speaks of the recognition of the animal through a distinguishing mark as the discovery of a "word of the soul" [*Wort der Seele*]. The new mark is, indeed, a sound, the bleating, but it can become the name of the sheep, "even though [the human's] tongue may never have tried to stammer it."⁴²

Nevertheless, I want to see the origin of this idea in Herder, not just because it so obviously flows from his concern to situate thought in a life form, but because he himself stresses elsewhere (including elsewhere in this same work) the importance of speech and vocal expression for the human life form.⁴³

This substantive point about language is an answer to the question of whether things can have this meaning for us without (real, spoken, enacted)

40. See, for example, *De La Grammatologie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967). Derrida's almost obsessive attempt to deny altogether any special status whatever to speech in the human language capacity raises the question whether he doesn't have more in common with the Cartesian tradition than he would like to admit. "*L'écriture*" and "*la différence*", while embedded in culture (or constitutive of it), are peculiarly disembodied functions. See also *L'Écriture et la Différance* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1967).

41. See Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie*.

42. Herder, *Ursprung*, 24–25.

43. See, for instance, "How singular, that a moveable breath of air should be the sole, or at least the best, medium of our thoughts and perceptions! Without its incomprehensible connexion with all the operations of our [soul] which are so dissimilar to it [this breath] these operations would never have taken place. . . . A people have no idea for which they do not have a word: the liveliest imagination remains an obscure feeling, till the mind finds a character for it. And by means of a word incorporates it with the memory, the recollection, the understanding, and lastly the understanding of mankind, tradition: a pure understanding, without language, on Earth, is an utopian land." Johann Gottfried Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, trans. T. Churchill (London: Luke Hansard, 1803), 420. [Wie sonderbar, dass ein bewegter Lufthauch das einzige, wenigstens das beste Mittel unserer Gedanken und Entdeckungen sein sollte! Ohne sein unbegreifliches Band mit allem ihm so ungleichen Handlungen unserer Seele wären diese Handlungen ungeschähen . . . Ein Volk hat keine Idee, zu der es kein Wort hat: die lebhafteste Anschauung bleibt dunkles Gefühl, bis die Seele ein Merkmal findet und es durchs Wort dem Gedächtnis, der Rückerrinerung, dem Verstande, ja endlich dem Verstande der Menschen, der Tradition einverleibt; eine reine Vernunft ohne Sprache ist auf Erden ein utopisches Land]; Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (Berlin: Michael Holzinger, 2013), book 9, chapter 2.

language. And the Herderian answer is "no". Contemporary philosophers are familiar with this thesis, and with arguments for it, most notoriously perhaps from Wittgenstein. These arguments are sometimes construed as deployed from an observer's perspective: how could you tell for any creature you were studying whether it was defining features or attributing properties, as against just treating things functionally in relation to simple ends, unless this being had language?⁴⁴ But Wittgenstein actually uses it at a more radical level. The issue is not: how would some observer know? But how would the agent itself know? And what sense would there be in talking of attributing properties if the agent didn't know which? Wittgenstein makes us sensible of this more radical argument in *Philosophical Investigations* 1.258 and following: the famous discussion about the sensation whose occurrences the subject wants to record in a diary. Wittgenstein pushes our intuitions to the following revelatory impasse: what would it be like to know what it is you're attending to, and yet be able to say absolutely nothing about it? The answer is, that this supposition shows itself to be incoherent. The plausibility of the scenario comes from our having set it up as our attending to a *sensation*. But take even this description away, leave it absolutely without any characterization at all, and it dissolves into nothing.⁴⁵ Of course, something can defy description; it can have a *je ne sais quoi* quality. But this is only because it is placed somewhere by language. It is an indescribable feeling, or experience, or virtue, or whatever. The sense of being unable to say wouldn't be there without the surrounding sayable. Language is what constitutes the linguistic dimension.

We could sum up the point in this way. Herder's analysis establishes a distinction between (Ro) the case where an agent's (nonsemantic) response to an object is *conditional* on its having certain features, and/or *because* of certain features (the rat rushes the door when this has a triangle on it, because this has been paired with reward), and (Rs) the case where the agent's response consists (at least partly) in *identifying* the object as the locus of certain features. It is Rs that we want to call responding to a thing

44. Mark Okrent offers an argument of this form in *Heidegger's Pragmatism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), chapter 3.

45. "And it would not help either to say that it need not be a *sensation*; that when he writes 'S', he has *something*—and that is all that can be said. 'Has' and 'something' also belong to our common language.—So in the end when one is doing philosophy one gets to the point where one would like just to emit an inarticulate sound." Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 1.261 [*Und es helfe auch nichts, zu sagen: es müsse keine Empfindung sein; wenn er 'E' schreibe, habe er Etwas—und mehr könnten wir nicht sagen. Aber 'haben' und 'etwas' gehören auch zur allgemeinen Sprache.—So gelangt man beim Philosophieren am Ende dahin, wo man nur noch einen unartikulierten Laut aussprechen möchte*].

as that thing. Once these two are distinguished, it is intuitively clear that Rs is impossible without language. This is what Wittgenstein's example shows up. He chooses an exercise (identifying of each new occurrence whether it is the same as an original paradigm) which is inherently in the Rs range, and we can see straight off that there is no way this issue could even *arise* for a nonlinguistic creature.

This in turn throws light on the other facets of the linguistic dimension. Consider the case of strong value mentioned above. What would it be to have such a sense without language? It can't just consist in certain things being very strongly desired. There has to be the sense of their being worthy of this desire. The motivation has a different quality. But how would the distinction of quality stand out for the creature itself from differences of force of desire? We can't just say: because its reaction would be different. This is, of course, true as far as it goes. A difference of reaction may be at a certain stage the only way a moral distinction is marked. But then the distinction must be carried in the kind of reaction, for example one of shock, or horror, or awe and admiration. But consider what we mean by a reaction of horror. It doesn't just mean a negative one, even strongly negative. There is only horror when the reaction expresses a recognition that the act was heinous or gruesome. But how can a creature distinguish the heinous or gruesome from the merely (in a nonmoral sense) repugnant, unless it can identify the act *as* heinous? How does it have a sense of *transgression*, unless it had language or some way of *expressing* its experience of the heinous?

The impossibility of an external observer's knowing really turns on something more radical, the impossibility of the creature's being in the linguistic dimension without language. This is the crux of Herder's thesis, that language is constitutive of reflection. And at the same time, this shows how a constitutive theory of language breaks out of the bounds of the enframing. We can't explain language by the function it plays within a pre- or extralinguistically conceived framework of human life, because language through constituting the semantic dimension transforms any such framework, giving us new feelings, new desires, new goals, new relationships, and introduces a dimension of strong value. Language can only be explained through a radical discontinuity with the extralinguistic.

Of course, this argument of Wittgenstein may be taken as showing only that an agent must have some grasp of an articulated language, even if it

act of restoring concord by saying, for example, "I'm sorry", we speak of "apologizing". We step to the "meta" level and describe what we're doing. We can call the vocabulary we deploy here, following Silverstein, "metapragmatic".⁴⁶ Then, of course, we can sometimes restore harmony by saying "I apologize", which again looks like a self-description, but which everyone recognizes as a "performative".

We see something similar with the whole range of footings that come about in human culture, those of intimacy and distance, or those of hierarchy and equality, those of kinship and outsider; and the whole range of more officially codified footings which constitute our polity, economy, and civil society. And we see that these are constituted partly through ritual expressions, and then in their more refined regions through (metapragmatic) descriptions; like 'president', 'prime minister', 'CEO', 'director of department', and so on.

And in the example above of our moral discriminations, we can see that these are constituted in part through expressive reactions (horror at this dastardly act, beaming admiration for that heroic deed), and on the metalevel by descriptive terms like 'moral', 'aesthetic', 'etiquette', which are paradigms of domains which are not independent of the way they are characterized in language.

We have tumbled outside the range that enframing theories were designed to deal with, which was very much that of the descriptive coding and communication of information, particularly useful in a scientific context, and that of exchanging orders and recommendations for action, and engaging in common deliberation. And it is indeed, very obvious that language enables a more refined coordination of action, as well as rational deliberation, and the acquisition of knowledge which can help us decide what to do. Encoding states of affairs, either which exist, or which we might want to bring about, is obviously central to these purposes. But once we lose sight of the language-constituted background which enables these activities, once we just take it as given, it is easy to slide into seeing our emotions, footings, normative understandings as well as simply given, as it were, in the nature of things.

Reciprocally, once we come to see how language can help constitute our emotions, footings, norms, we are cured from a narrow view of the func-

46. See, for instance, Michael Silverstein "Metapragmatic Discourse and Metapragmatic Function," in *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics*, ed. J. Lucy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 33–58. *

only an intramental grasp, if he/she is to make sense of these distinctions; whereas Herder's expressivism asserts the necessity of a behaviorally enacted language in words and deeds. The necessity of this latter has to be shown in order to clinch Wirtgenstein's argument against the possibility of a private language. The basic thesis is a genetic one, that we could never have the silent, monological, inner language if we hadn't first acquired the language capacity in its expressed-enacted form. I will return to this below.

5

Let's pause for a minute and take stock of how far we have traveled. I started off with the contrast between an enframing and a constitutive theory of language; and I identified the constitutive view in terms of Herder's notion of "reflection", the background understanding inseparable from language that the terms we use are (intrinsically) "right". Our first examples were drawn from the field of ordinary description, the characterization of independent objects, but we very soon saw that this understanding of intrinsic rightness operates way beyond this sphere. There is also the domain where we find terms for "objects" which are not independent of their designation: for instance our feelings and emotions, which are sometimes transformed when we find a more penetrating or insightful language to describe them.

Then there are the uses of language wherein we establish (or rupture) intimacy, communication, concord with others, as in my example above where I say "I'm sorry" to heal the breach between us. This is, on the surface, a descriptive statement, and if it didn't correspond sincerely to how I feel, it would probably fail its purpose; but this purpose is not to describe accurately, but to bring about something, reconciliation. There is a quasi-ritual element here; and to do what it's meant to do, it's not sufficient to feel contrite; I have to *say* it, to *express* contrition. I want to change the (at present bad) footing we're on with each other, and restore harmony. We're in the domain that is often identified as "pragmatic", as against "semantic".

This domain is frequently transformed, made more conscious and refined, by description at a new level. We not only rupture and then restore intimacy by the things we say, but we reflect on and give names to these footings and their makings and breakings. We speak of a relation of "harmony", or "intimacy", or "concord", and we give a name to the

tions of language as encoding information. A difference about the nature of linguistic meaning rapidly escalates into wider questions about the shape, scope, and uses of language. This wider set of issues was decisively put on the agenda by Wittgenstein, notably in his *Philosophical Investigations*. His protest against the construal of all subject-predicate sentences on the model of descriptive attribution took the form of a demand to recognize a plurality of "language games", which operate on different logical "grammars". He sought to undo the overshadowing of all other uses on behalf of the information-sharing, instructional, deliberative uses which are central to post-Fregean philosophy, the (much more sophisticated) twentieth-century successor of the HLC. This hegemony still seems to hold in the most refined versions of this philosophy, for example with Robert Brandom. I will discuss this below.⁴⁷

6

Herder has provided my paradigm of a constitutive theory of language. Let's now look a bit further at the ramifications and developments of this kind of theory since Herder.

Herder's constitutive theory gave a creative role to expression. Views of the HLC type related linguistic expression to some preexisting content. For Locke, a word is introduced by being linked with an idea, and henceforth becomes capable of expressing it.⁴⁸ The content precedes its external means of expression. Condillac develops a more sophisticated conception. He argues that introducing words ("instituted signs") allows us to discriminate more finely the nuances of our ideas because it gives us greater control over the train of thoughts. This means that we identify finer distinctions, which we in turn can name, which will again allow us to make still more subtle discriminations, and so on. In this way, language makes possible science and enlightenment. But at each stage of this process, the idea precedes its naming, albeit its discriminability results from a previous act of naming.

Condillac also gave emotional expression an important role in the genesis of language. His view was that the first instituted signs were framed from natural ones. But natural signs were just the inbuilt expressions of

47. See Chapter 4.

48. See Locke, *Essay*, 3.2.2.

our emotional states, animal cries of joy or fear. That language originated from the expressive cry became the consensus in the learned world of the eighteenth century. But the conception of expression here was quite inert. What the expression conveyed was thought to exist independently of its utterance. Cries made fear or joy evident to others, but they didn't help constitute these feelings themselves.

Herder develops a quite different notion of expression. This is in the logic of a constitutive theory, as I have just described it. This tells us that language constitutes the semantic, and more broadly, the linguistic dimension, that is, that possessing language enables us to relate to things in new ways, for example as loci of features, and to have new emotions, goals, relationships, as well as being responsive to issues of strong value. We might say: language transforms our world, using this last word in a clearly Heidegger-derived sense. That is, we are talking not of the cosmos out there, which preceded us and is indifferent to us, but of the world of our involvements, including all the things they incorporate in their meaning for us. 'Meaning' is being used in the phenomenologically derived sense introduced above. Something has meaning for us in this sense when it has a certain significance or relevance in our lives. *So much is standard English*. The neologism will consist in using this as a count noun, so that we can speak of the different ways that things are significant as different "meanings", or speak of a new form of significance as "a new meaning".⁴⁹

Then we can rephrase the constitutive view by saying that language introduces new meanings in our world: the things which surround us become potential bearers of properties; they can have new emotional significance for us, for example as objects of admiration or indignation; our links with others can count for us in new ways, as lovers, spouses, or fellow citizens; and they can have strong value.

But then this involves attributing a creative role to expression. Bringing things to speech can't mean just making externally available what is already there. There are many banal speech acts where this seems to be all that is involved. But language as a whole must involve more than this,

49. Okrent, "Pragmatism," uses the happy expression "meaning-subscript-h" to carry this sense, contrasting it with "meaning-subscript-i" to carry the familiar sense where we want to talk about the meaning of a word. This is an excellent way to avoid confusion. But I don't know how to manipulate subscripts on this computer, and so I'm going to take a chance, a well-warranted risk considering the phenomenologically sophisticated audience I'm writing for here. I hope the context will always make clear which sense I mean.

because it is also opening possibilities for us which wouldn't be there in its absence.

The constitutive theory turns our attention toward the creative dimension of expression, in which, to speak paradoxically, it makes possible its own content. We can actually see this in familiar, everyday realities, but it tends to be screened out from the enframing perspective, and it took the development of constitutive theories to bring it to light.

A good example is the "body language" of personal style. We see the leather-jacketed motorbike rider step away from his machine and swagger toward us with an exaggeratedly leisurely pace. This person is "saying something" in his way of moving, acting, speaking. He may have no words for it, though we might want to apply the Hispanic word 'macho' as at least a partial description. Here is an elaborate way of being in the world, of feeling and desiring and reacting, which involves great sensitivity to certain things (like slights to one's honor: we are now the object of his attention, because we unwittingly cut him off at the last intersection), and cultivated-but-supposedly-spontaneous insensitivity to others (like the feelings of dudes and females), which involves certain prized pleasures (riding around at high speed with the gang) and others which are despised (listening to sentimental songs); and this way of being is coded as strongly valuable; that is, being this way is admired, and failing to be earns contempt.

But how coded? Not, presumably in descriptive terms, or at least not adequately. The person may not have a term like 'macho' which articulates the value involved. What terms he does have may be woefully inadequate to capture what is specific to this way of being; the epithets of praise or opprobrium may only be revelatory in the whole context of this style of action; by themselves they may be too general. Knowing that X is "one of the boys" and Y is a "dude" may tell us little. The crucial coding is in the body expressive language.

The biker's world incorporates the strong value of this way of being. Let's call it (somewhat inadequately, but we need a word) 'machismo'. But how does this meaning exist for him? Only through the expressive gesture and stance. It's not just that an outside observer would have no call to attribute machismo to him without this behavior. It is more radically that a strong value like this can only exist for him articulated in some form. It is this expressive style that enables machismo to exist for him, and more widely this domain of expressive body language is the

locus of a whole host of different value-coded ways of being for humans in general. The expression makes possible its content; the language opens us out to the domain of meaning it encodes. Expression is no longer simply inert.

But when we turn back from this rather obvious case to the original description case, which was central to HLC theories, we see this too in a new light. Here too expression must be seen as creative; language opens us to the domain it encodes. What descriptive speech encodes is our attribution of properties to things. But possessing this descriptive language is the condition of our being sensitive to the issues of intrinsic rightness which must be guiding us if we are really to be attributing properties, as we saw above. So seeing expression as creative generates Herder's constitutive theory as applied to descriptive language.

This illustrates the inner connections, both historical and logical, between the constitutive theory and a strong view of expression. Either the espousal of the first can lead one to look for places where expression obviously opens us to its own content, which we will find in this domain of body language, and with emotional expression generally. Or else, the sense that expression is creative, which will likely strike us if we are attending closely to the life of the emotions, will lead us to revise our understanding of the much-discussed case of description. In the case of Herder, the connections probably go in both directions, but if anything the second is more important than the first. The major proponents of the HLC were all rationalists in some sense; one of their central goals was to establish reason on a sound basis, and their scrutiny of language had largely this end in view. The proto-Romantic move to dethrone reason, and to locate the specifically human capacities in feeling, naturally led to a richer concept of expression than was allowed for in Condillac's natural cries, which were quite inert modes of utterance. From the standpoint of this richer notion, even the landscape of descriptive speech begins to look very different. But whatever the direction of travel, a road links the constitutive insight with the strong view of expression, so that the alternative to the enframing theory might with equal justice be called the constitutive-expressive.⁵⁰

50. Charles Guignon has used the term 'expressive' for this view on language, in specific application to Heidegger. See his "Heidegger: Language as the House of Being" in *The Philosophy of Discourse: The Rhetorical Turn in Twentieth-Century Thought*, Vol. II, ed. Chip Sills and George H.

Being constitutive means that language makes possible its own content, in a sense, or opens us to the domain it encodes. The two cases we have just looked at: bodily expression and ordinary description, seem to involve somewhat different forms of this.⁵¹ In the latter case, language gives us access in a new way to a range of preexisting things. We identify them as what they are; they show up for us as loci of features. In the machismo case, we feel more tempted to say that something new comes into existence through expression, viz., this way of being which our biker values. Prior to the coinage of this range of expression, this life ideal didn't exist.

The parallel between the two cases is that in both language makes possible new meanings. In the descriptive case, the new meaning is just things showing up as something. This also involves a new way of being in the world for us. Reciprocally, the bodily gesture case involves more than a new way of being; machismo also makes preexisting things show up in new ways, for example we show up as dudes. So each involves, as it were, two dimensions: (1) a new manner of disclosure of what in a sense already exists (that is, identity propositions hold between items under previously available descriptions and items described in newly accessible ways), and (2) a new manner of being, or a new human possibility. We might call these two dimensions respectively, the accessive (1) and the existential (2).

The difference between the two kinds of case lies in the balance of significance. Some new uses of language (e.g., a more rigorous scientific discourse) seem mainly significant because of their accessive dimension; others, like our bodily expression case above, seem important because of their existential innovations.

But it is not true, of course, that descriptive language invariably fits in the first category, while expressive gesture makes up the second. Many uses of descriptive language have primordially existential import.

This is already true of words identifying things of strong value, for example the terms 'macho' and 'dude' in the above example. Insofar as the

Jensen (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1992), 171-77. It follows from the above that this is just as legitimate a term as 'constitutive', or the double-barreled combination.

51. It will undoubtedly seem strange to many readers that I am treating bodily expression, as well as description, as part of 'language'. And in fact, expressive constitutive theories are led to see the two as linked, and to see the phenomenon to be explained, the human linguistic capacity, as involving a range of "symbolic forms", and not just what we think of normally as "speech".

biker isn't totally inarticulate (and how could he be, being human?), terms like this will also, along with body language, help existentially constitute his way of being. But this is also true of the language of social positions and relations. Distinctions like friends/lovers, or king/president/leader, define a space of possibilities within a given culture. This space is not the same from culture to culture, which is why translation is often hazardous (Greek *philia* is only approximately rendered by English 'friendship'). These terms have helped constitute the existential possibilities for a given society.

Then there are the languages of the self. I have tried to show how the language of inwardness, for instance, and the peculiar form of moral topography it lays out, is connected in the modern West with certain moral ideals and certain notions of identity.⁵² But such locations as "inner depths" wouldn't be immediately comprehensible to people in some other cultures. Language is helping to shape us here.

This can be made sense of in the light of the earlier account of descriptive languages. It allows us to locate features, as I put it. New descriptive languages lay out new topographies, a new disposition of places. But humans as self-interpreting animals are partly constituted by their own self-descriptions. And so a new topography of the self cannot but have existential import.

So language is existentially constitutive in more than its expressive modes. These are essential, as we shall see more clearly below, but when we look at the way in which new human meanings come to exist for us, we see an interweaving of the expressive and the descriptive. Certain meanings enter our world in the course of early training simply through our being taught to express them in our bodily behavior. We can imagine that our biker learnt this macho style through watching, imitating, alternatively being laughed at and praised, and then eventually being accepted into the gang by his older brother and companions. Of course, he learnt it partly through verbal exchanges, for instance when he was put down for behaving "like a girl", or a sissy. But all these words would have remained opaque, if he hadn't picked up the personal style which made sense of them.

This kind of learning obviously plays an important role in human life, the more crucial the earlier we go back in our development as children.

52. See Taylor, *Sources*. ★

Bourdieu speaks of our learning meanings, for instance values and norms, through embodied enactment as the acquisition of a "habitus." The habitus is a "system of durable and transposable dispositions";⁵³ that means, dispositions to bodily comportment, say, to act, or to hold oneself, or to gesture in a certain way. A bodily disposition is a habitus when it encodes a certain cultural understanding. The habitus in this sense always has an expressive dimension. It gives expression to certain meanings that things and people have for us, and it is precisely by giving such expression that it makes these meanings exist for us.

Children are inducted into a culture, are taught the meanings which constitute it, partly through inculcating the appropriate habitus. We learn how to hold ourselves, how to defer to others, how to be a presence for others, all largely through taking on different styles of bodily comportment. Through these modes of deference and presentation, the subtlest nuances of social position, of the sources of prestige, and hence of what is valuable and good, are encoded.

Adapting a phrase of Proust's, one might say that arms and legs are full of numb imperatives. One could endlessly enumerate the values given body, made body, by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy which can instil a whole cosmology, through injunctions as insignificant as 'sit up straight' or 'don't hold your knife in your left hand', and inscribe the most fundamental principles of the arbitrary content of a culture in seemingly innocuous details of bearing or physical and verbal manners, so putting them beyond the reach of consciousness and explicit statement.

[On pourrait, déformant le mot de Proust, dire que les jambes, les bras sont pleins d'impératifs engourdis. Et l'on n'en finirait pas d'énumérer les valeurs faites corps, par la transsubstantiation qu'opère la persuasion clandestine d'une pédagogie implicite, capable d'inculquer toute une cosmologie, une éthique, une métaphysique, une politique, à travers des injonctions aussi insignifiantes que 'tiens-toi droit' ou 'ne tiens pas ton couteau de la main gauche' et d'inscrire dans les détails en apparence les plus insignifiants de la « tenue », du « maintien » ou des « manières » corporelles et verbales les principes fondamentaux de

53. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980), 88.

l'arbitraire culturel, ainsi placés hors des prises de la conscience et de l'explicitation.]⁵⁴

This is one way in which norms and rules can exist in our lives, as "values made flesh." Of course, it is not the only way. Some rules *are* formulated expressly, say "honor your elders." And of course, there are always *some* injunctions given, such as "*tiens-toi droit*"⁵⁵ or "don't speak like that again to Grandma, or I'll whack you!" But even with express norms, where the point is formulated (in this case, honoring elders), these are in close interrelation to our habitus. The two normally dovetail, and complement each other. Bourdieu speaks of habitus and institutions as "two modes of objectification of past history" [*deux modes d'objectivation de l'histoire passée*].⁵⁶ The latter are generally the locus of express rules or norms. But rules aren't self-interpreting; without a sense of what they're about, and an affinity to their spirit, they remain dead letters, or become a travesty in practice. This sense and this affinity can only exist where they do in our unformulated, embodied understanding. They are in the domain of the habitus, which is "a practical sense which reactivates the sense objectified in institutions" [*comme sens pratique opère la "reactivation" du sens objectivé dans les institutions*].⁵⁷

When the young learn to show respect for their elders, they really grasp this point, even if they can't articulate it in words; they learn you might say to embody this point, not just a set of movements, but also the spirit they express. That is why we can outrageously show disrespect by just "going through the motions", or by ironically exaggerating our bow. And that is why teenagers who have attained to a certain articulacy can enrage their parents, saying with faux innocence, "speak like what to Grandma?" This is more effective a goad if the parents are less articulate, and have trouble explaining the point.

We might say that they learn to embody the point; or to enact it bodily. But this doesn't mean that articulating this point makes no difference. On the contrary, to bring the value, or good or norm, to speech, makes it exist for us in a new way. It comes into focus for us. It acquires

54. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 69; Bourdieu, *Pratique*, 117.

55. "sit up straight."

56. Bourdieu, *Pratique*, 57; Bourdieu, *Pratique*, 95-96.

57. Bourdieu, *Pratique*, 57; Bourdieu, *Pratique*, 96.

clarity for us, and sometimes as a result has greater force. This in turn can bring about two kinds of reactions. On one hand an articulated good can work on us more powerfully, and motivate us more than before; on the other, getting clear on what is involved here may make it possible for us to break away from it, and repudiate a value which we had learnt to embody.

We might thus learn a new norm in two stages, at first through being trained to embody it expressively (bowing to elders), and later through hearing explicit rules. This corresponds to the two stages of pragmatics discussed in the previous section: first we establish ways, one might say rituals, of, for example, restoring intimacy. And then we can bring these to focal attention by introducing metapragmatic terms, like 'apologize'.

So while some new coinages in language have mainly accessive importance—they open a new range of phenomena to us, for instance terms to classify animals or trees—others, which articulate meanings, have existential import. And we acquire the range of meanings which make up our world through an interplay of embodied expression, and of articulation. (As to take up the example of the previous section, when I articulate my feeling as one of envy.)

Instead of speaking of "embodied expression", we might say "enactment".⁵⁸ We learn first to enact certain meanings, and then we may learn to describe them. Both are necessary, but it seems clear that there is a certain ontogenetic primacy of the former. Our first introduction to crucial human meanings, as infants, has to be enactive. We learn a certain embodied language of love, or of strife and complaint, of pleading and pouting, and the rest. Enactment has to come first; on this basis, we can learn to use certain words and phrases like 'love', 'being good' or 'being naughty', later on 'being fair', 'being kind', and so on. And this first vocabulary forms the basis for further, deeper articulations. Enacted meaning provides the context within which articulated meanings can arise and be understood.

We might return here to the discussion of section 3, where I made a clear distinction between making it up to you by saying "I'm sorry", and strate-

58. The reference here to the theories of Evan Thompson and others is deliberate. I see a connection between their understanding of meanings as finding their evolutionary origin in enactment and my assertion of the primacy of enactment in the case of our human meanings. See Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Science of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

gically getting you to return to me by causing an explosion which frightens you. The rightness of "I'm sorry" consists in its expressing-by-portraying my contrite condition; and this is what wins you back and dissolves your anger.

But how about if I say nothing, just come back to you with a soulful look, holding out a bouquet of flowers? Well, maybe we can forget the flowers, which have become symbols of love and love-offering; I just have a soulful and pleading look. Aren't we getting close here to certain animal species? For instance, a baboon may mollify another angry one by initiating a grooming ritual. This is the "right thing" for the timid baboon to do, but does this rightness consist in anything else than its producing this result? Can we make a distinction here between what is in the linguistic dimension and what isn't?

We might be tempted to answer no. But then what about my soulful look? The problem seems here that my look just enacts contrition and desire to be readmitted to your good graces; there is no element of portrayal, as there is with "I'm sorry".

But the fact is, with humans, enacting a meaning lies fully within the linguistic dimension. In the following sense, that enacting/expressing can help constitute a meaning which wasn't in our world before. We have just seen several examples of this.

This shows how my trying to heal the breach between us by my soulful look stands apart from baboon grooming. What separates it is the way in which our lives have been shaped by expressed meanings (here my contrition and yearning for return) which have also been defined and constituted in and by their expression. So this look is right, not just task-strategically (winning you back); in fact, it is only right task-strategically through being right expressively, that is, it belongs to the range of expression which helps constitute this meaningful human stance of contrition and yearning. Moreover, and not surprisingly, like other modes of constitutive human language, this kind of look and the meanings it expresses will vary subtly or widely from society to society and culture and culture—even in our rapidly changing age, from decade to decade, as lovers of interwar movies can attest.

I distinguished in the last section two ways in which language can open us to new possibilities, the accessive and the existential. In the first case,

we sense that language is enabling us to have "reflective" awareness of what previously was there (by, for instance, distinguishing more clearly the species of animals in our environment). In the second, we see that language (in some broad sense) is opening us to new human meanings, new existential possibilities.

Now linguistic constitution in this existential sense seems to proceed along two tracks, which sometimes are interwoven but which can be notionally distinguished. In one we are given a new way of describing, or a new model for understanding, our human condition and the alternatives it opens for us; and through this we come to see and perhaps embrace a new human possibility. We may come to this existential insight through meeting, or hearing about, some paradigmatic figure (the Buddha, St. Francis), or by reading a book about ethics or the meaning of life, or (more often) through reading a novel or seeing a film. (In this last case, the experience can consist in a sort of encounter with a—fictional—paradigmatic figure [Levin, Zossima]). In all these cases, the impact can be described as a regestaling of our world and its possibilities, which opens a new (to us) way of being. So we can speak here of a regestaling constitution.

We can sometimes win through to this regestaling on our own, where under the pressure of some quandary, or difficult decision, we come to see our possibilities in a new light (and this may then retrospectively connect up with something we read or encountered earlier, which is now itself reassessed in the light of our new insight). In whatever way, regestaling offers us new terms or models to understand our lives.

The other track through which new existential possibilities emerge is what I called above "enactment," and a good example is the case of the biker (or the first to initiate this kind of machismo). New existential possibilities which emerge through enactment are often not simply individual styles, but ways of being together (which the machismo of the bikers also is). There is in any culture a range of footings we can be on with each other: intimate or formal, deferential or egalitarian, narrowly functional (clerk and customer meeting in the store) or open-ended (striking up a conversation in a pub); and there are in addition a range of institutional relations (bureaucrats meeting citizens, MPs in relation to constituents, etc.). These are usually constituted through enactment, and moreover, they are often in continual reshaping and reformulation as they

are enacted in daily life. (This is perhaps particularly true of contemporary society.)

We can see from this how there are a variety of contexts in which there can be a "right word" (or expression, or gesture). There can be a correct use of a word as a description of an independent reality through a vocabulary which gives us access to the domain ("that's a triangle"). And there can be the great skill of a novelist in evoking a fictional reality which gives us insight into new possibilities. And then there can be the right word (gesture, tone of voice) which inaugurates an enacted relation; or damages it, or restores it when damaged (as when I say "I'm sorry" in my earlier example); and there are a host of other cases, or uses of language, or language games to adopt Wittgenstein's usage.

Attributing features is only one of the things we do in language, and not the most "primordial". Our speech or expressive behavior can also disclose the true order of things, cosmic or social; or the order of our feelings and desires; it can be appropriate or inappropriate to one or other of these orders; or it can disturb or help reestablish some such order; it can create harmony or disharmony between us; and so on through a large range. The linguistic dimension opens us to a family of modes of intrinsic rightness, which can't simply be modeled on descriptive rightness as their paradigm. Rather, as we shall see, the language games of descriptive adequacy can only arise against a rich background of other modes of rightness. These relate, as we shall see below, to the range of activities which form the essential matrix within which language (including that of disinterested description) can alone arise, the "forms of life" which sustain it.

I have been distinguishing two dimensions of disclosure, two ways that new words, expressions, or ways of acting can extend our grasp of things in the world, or human life. I called these the accessive and the existential. But there is another way that a distinction can be drawn. We could speak of different facets of the constitutive power of language. One might be described as general: our possession of language allows us to have a "reflective" awareness of the world and ourselves, which becomes greater the more articulate we manage to be. This general function relates closely to what I've been calling the accessive.

But alongside this, there are particular ways in which certain expressions or enactments open us to certain meanings and ways of being, and

thus widen the range of what is possible for us—as our imagined innovative biker disclosed machismo as a possible way of life. And here we are fully in the domain of the existential.

I want to treat, in Part II of this study, two such particular modes of constitution, which make possible respectively, what I want to call human meanings and footings. I will explore these in detail in Chapters 6 and 7.

8

We started off distinguishing “enframing” from “constitutive” theories of language, and we took this up by examining the battle between the classical early modern theory from Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac (the HLC view) and the critique which thinkers of the German Romantic generation, principally Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt (which I will call the HHH view) leveled against this theory. Seen in the light of this critique, one could describe the alternatives as a “designative-instrumental” approach versus one which was “expressive constitutive”.

But the discussion began to open other issues between the two views. One concerned the scope of language. The HLC tended to concentrate on spoken or written words as offering the means of describing the world, but the HHH, stressing the constitutive power of expression, also brings in forms of enactive meaning, like gesture, stance, body language, claiming that the interaction of these with descriptive meanings makes it impossible to understand these latter on their own.

We saw above how enacted meanings, as in the case of the biker, can be the basis of the later introduction of descriptive terms, like ‘macho’ (assuming, perhaps a little condescendingly, that the biker hadn’t yet coined a term for his style of being); and also how the imparting of a culture and way of life reposes both on the inculcation of habitus and the internalization of rules.

But perhaps more tellingly, full linguistic activity involves enacted meanings as well as meaningful speech. The primary locus of language is conversation, and the original locus of this is in face-to-face encounters. But setting up these requires not just word utterance but also body language, eye contact or its absence, tone of voice. It depends on these what kind of contact is set up in the conversation, what the footing is on which the partners stand.

Then, secondarily, the contact can be truncated: in one way, just to voice contact when we speak on the phone. Or in another way, we can also “converse” in epistolary exchange, which sheds enactment in mutual presence, but keeps some shadow invocation of it—it is at least clearly *addressed* (“Dear Henry”). Then we can move to written text, often not expressly addressed, although sometimes prefaced, and with occasional outbursts of, “dear reader”; all the way to terse announcement: “Trespassers will be prosecuted.”

But why think of this as full action being truncated *down*, rather than minimal information-coding-and-imparting being *added to*, so that one rises, through address and mutual presence, to full speech action?

Because we cannot but enter speech through full action, and then only later learn to function with truncated forms. We couldn’t learn to write a treatise before we learnt to converse. Any doubts one might entertain on this score will be dispelled in Chapter 2.

In fact, one facet of the constitutive power of language lies precisely in discourse, in the way we set up or challenge and modify footings through exchange, independently of, though later transformed by, the names we give them. The way in which finding a descriptive term can change a footing reflects the other major facet of linguistic constitution, the way in which articulate expression changes human meanings. I will explore the power of discourse below in Chapter 7.

And so our two theories are driven even further apart: they disagree on what needs to be explained under the heading of language. And this disagreement will get even wider as the discussion proceeds, and we begin to look at the place of art, literature, music, dancing, in relation to linguistic competence; can a line be drawn between these and language in a narrower and more conventional sense? Or is our explicandum rather indissociably the full range of what Cassirer called the “symbolic forms”?

A second new issue is that of holism. We already saw this in connection with the Herder-Humboldt view of language as a web, the inconceivability of linguistic terms being invented just one by one. On this issue the original HLC notion of the primacy of the individual word has been irremediably relegated by the work of Frege (showing the primacy of the sentence), and that of Saussure (on the primacy of difference over positive terms). But perhaps all the implications of this relegation have yet to be appreciated by contemporary heirs of the HLC.

And in addition, there is another kind of atomism in our tradition, which needs to be overcome by a corresponding holism; not just the atomism of

the word, but that of the individual subject of language. The HLC theory was thoroughly monological. What needs to be recognized is the primacy of communication, of the dialogical. The thinkers of the HHH all saw that the primary locus of language was conversation. Language doesn't just develop inside individuals, to be then communication to others. It evolves always in the interspace of joint attention, or communion. It is this holism that I want to expound in Chapter 2.

2

How Language Grows

1

So Herder inaugurates, or at least strikes a blow for constitutive theories in his critique of Condillac. But the irony is (and critics of this view of Herder as innovator, such as Hans Aarsleff,¹ have not failed to point this out) that Herder, while ridiculing Condillac's explanation of the origin of language, hardly does any better himself at this task. His "just so" story has a human suddenly coining a term for sheep on becoming aware of a criterial property of animals of this species, their bleating. So the first inventor of language suddenly expresses this insight (to himself) with the phrase (addressed inwardly to the sheep): "you are the bleating one" [*du bist das Blöckende*]; he says this to himself because Herder speaks of this "first word" as a "word of the soul" [*Wort der Seele*].

The purely inward and monological nature of this operation goes against insights that Herder has (about the gestural and dialogical nature of language) in other places in his work. But apart from this, Herder's great step, which was to point to the new dimension of reflection [*Besonnenheit*] doesn't itself answer Condillac's question. The ridicule comes at Condillac's assumption (typical of enframing theories), that the first step into language

1. See Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). Aarsleff's dismissal of Herder as an innovator is a good illustration of how easily the two sides in the debate can talk past each other. If we take no account of Herder's shift in perspective, then he can indeed seem to be recapitulating a number of themes from Condillac, while confusedly protesting his disagreement with him.