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## Philosophy: An Undisciplined Discipline

B. W. Dunst

### Preamble/Abstract

As a basis or entry point into contemplative thought the ethical gaze provides no grounds for definitive determination of feelings. That is, ethics does not, cannot, and will not work toward the implicit goal of *ataraxia*. It is not that I have ill will towards ethicists; on the contrary, the ethicist is engaged in one of the activities that I hold in high regard; at least in an abstract sense. The ethicist looks to find how to go about answering the question of “how ‘should’ we go about living?” he does this by examining into reasons for, and reasons against; desires for and against etc. The ethicist is looking to find answers because his question is formulated directly (How should we be? What should I do?). With such pointed questions (and we will see that these questions are, strictly speaking, no more pointed than any other question that could be posed) it is of no surprise that there are answers sought—there is some sort of end-goal to an ethicist’s inquiries. An ethicist would likely refute this by citing that he *knows* that there are no *answers*, and give some account or reason for continuing his pursuit. The ethicist *is* a philosopher after all, and as such, he does not content himself with unfinished thoughts, unconcluded conclusions. The philosopher, as well as the ethicist, takes it as his duty (in some sense or another) to fully develop an accurate account of something—to feel and describe Truth intimately. It is in this way, and probably only

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in this way that the philosopher is like the scientist. Both the philosopher and scientist are up against what they know to be an unending task. Metaphorically speaking, each shovel-full of dirt reveals that there is more dirt they could have dug—that they'd made progress in the act of digging, but that the result is always the same: more dirt, the task unfinished. And in knowing that the task is, in its nature, unsatisfiable he clutches at some sort of ground, or thinks he's grasped something to hold on to—something immovable (at least in some relativistic frame of reference). It is said that the gravitational orbit of the moon is the same as the moon always falling inward toward the earth, angularly with respect to the earth's center of mass. Philosophically we're all falling whether we feel like we're standing on solid ground or not. Our situation is actually quite a bit more dire: we're falling in all 'directions' at once, while paradoxically never in a fixed 'position'. So what makes the philosopher or ethicist or scientist continue in his pursuits? Is it the feeling that we are making some progress? A base sense that we're drawing a line and it's got to be a line *of something*? But to make progress one has to have a goal toward which one is to progress; to pose a question is to suppose a solution. The ethicist and the scientist pose their questions, automatically supposing solutions. They recognize that each solution is another formulation of question, and keep digging. They know they've got a paradox on their hands; the ethicist or scientist must keep digging but knows he'll be met with more dirt. He knows the nature of the act is incompatible with the actualization of the act. The philosopher wants to pose a question without supposing a solution, and he can never get away with it. The ethicist wants to pose a question (which supposes a solution), and work toward that hitherto undetermined solution. My claim is that he can and will never

have the possibility of claiming accomplishment in this endeavor. The scientist feels the pressure of a question posed, and the magnitude of seeking its solution—never seeing the end, but feeling progress. So it is in this way, and most likely in this way alone the philosopher and the ethicist share similarity with the scientist.

Now, I implied that I am specifically uninterested in ethics; which may have been misleading. I am certainly interested in meta-ethics or more generally any meta-discussion. I find that discussion of that which is 'unspeakable' in the Wittgensteinian sense is where most potential for interesting conversation lies. I'd like to investigate further what it is to make 'sense' and how this relates linguistically to such notions as 'context' and 'meaning'. In doing this I intend to examine or discuss what a richer understanding of these concepts entails ethically—that is, I'd like to dig a little deeper into this philosophical hole, then take a step back and describe what I see, and perhaps compare this with what some other philosophers have remarked upon seeing.

### **Which came first: Language or Thought?**

Let us begin with the claim that "It really does all begin with language". I'll not commit myself to that claim just yet, but it is at least a point of access—a way to get us to the hole so that we may think to dig. I'd like at first to approach the iterative 'problem of philosophy' (as I'd like to call it without necessarily hearkening to Russell's perennial work) by looking at a presumed essence of language. Not having access to the exact way in which language has developed, it is particularly difficult to be able to describe precisely the interplay between what might be called thought or idea, and language or communication. There are a couple basic (perhaps

incompatible?) theories that tend to occupy the bulk of the literature on this topic.

One such theory is that thoughts and ideas come first; that we have the abstract apprehension of something in a most basic form, and language is a tool by which we attempt to express that abstract apprehension. This theory presumes a couple premises which would be worthy of note: first that there is *something*, albeit abstract, that is apprehended. This means that on this theory there must exist some sort of discrete abstract entity—the apprehension. The apprehension has boundaries, or we would not be able to talk about *it*. It may be that this is not the case at all; perhaps ‘the apprehension’ is inaccurately linguistically expressed; perhaps we have made a mistake by discussing *it* because there really is no *it*—no abstract entity or apprehension of which to discuss. This is a splendid instance of what I call ‘*paradoxa*’ which will be discussed later in this article. In any case, if we are to talk about abstract apprehension, then within this theory the language itself is at the very least committed to an inaccuracy or paradox, and at best committed to abstract apprehensive entites.

Another theory is that language comes first; that there is no abstract apprehension, at least not in the same sense as the first theory. This is to say that there *may be* some abstract apprehensive entity, but that it is directly and completely dependant upon language with no sub-linguistic essence. On this theory language is much more than merely a tool, it is the means by which human thought is conducted; it is both the tool and the function that the tool carries out. As with the first theory, this one also presumes premises worth noting: for instance, if language is the penultimate essence of both human thought and expression, then how do we explain when language seems to ‘get it wrong’ on occasion (i.e. paradox, the

ability to be wrong about one's self, imprecision, the ability to lie, the possibility of metaphor or pun, etc)? This theory presumes that there are answers to that question.

Now suppose that neither 'thought' nor 'language' was greater. Then it reasons that both thought and language must be considered equivalent in whichever sense that 'greatness' was previously determined (by uniqueness). This theory could be formulated in a multitude of ways, perhaps such that thought and language interplay in some complex way that may not be apprehensible. Or perhaps the concepts 'thought' and 'language' are not fully developed—perhaps these concepts are one and the same, or unable to be developed further. Perhaps...there are too many degrees of freedom, and we're left with only conjecture and hearsay. If we are to ever make any progress in understanding how to grasp these notions of 'thought' (or idea) and its connection with language (whatever it may be) we must first manage to gain a grip on this iterative problem of philosophy.

### **The Iterative Problem of Philosophy**

The iterative 'problem of philosophy' to which I have previously referred is of particular poignancy and must be considered as often as possible in the realm of philosophical endeavor. When I said that I felt an affinity towards the activities in which an ethicist engages I meant it with respect to this problem. The problem simply stated, is that all attempts to make philosophical progress are condemned to suffering the fate of incoherence or intractability. It seems clear that in order to 'make progress' (a term that smacks wonderfully of scientism) we have to be completely rigorous about our methods. The scientific method is to control variables, hypothesize, experiment, record data, give results, and draw conclusions. If at any point there is deviance from

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this method, the conclusion is said to be drawn without rigor. This is the austere methodology of 'making progress'. Without rigor, it is clear to see that we must be ever-cautious of the validity of claims. If our claims are unsafe from scrutinizing their validity, then surely they are unsafe claims to be making. It is, however, important to note that nothing has been said about truth. The unsafe, unjustified, invalid, non-rigorous claim may still simply be true; and likewise the safe, justified, valid, rigorous claim may still simply be false (and probabilistic study would suggest that it most likely is—at least to some degree). This is not our current qualm. What we're concerned with is the yet-to-be-explicated 'iterative problem of philosophy' which I've suggested has something to do with rigorousness. Philosophers, ethicists, and scientists alike recognize that progress cannot be made without rigor—that if we want to make progress we must have rigorous methods. Thus, insofar as progress is our goal, then the way to go about securing progress is via methodological rigor. But what does it mean to set progress as a goal or to secure progress? To make progress is to draw a line in the sand. History, memory, the past, etc. give the secant points to show the shape of the line, but progress is not concerned with the shape; progress *shapes* as an active verb in the present tense. Progress cannot be a noun; and thus cannot be a goal. To progress is to progress *toward something*, just as to pose a question is to suppose an answer, as to identify a problem is to conceive of a solution—without one there cannot be the other; a conceptual unity of multiples, a filled Body Without Organs. It is here that we can see how philosophy (or its scientific cousin) faces an iterative problem. Each time we wish to investigate a philosophical problem, a problem or hypothesis must be formulated in order to be methodologically rigorous. But this is exactly the issue: problems suppose solutions;

hypotheses are falsifiable, resolvable, and eventually resolved. A solution implies in one sense an ending, the end to a problem; but in another sense a solution implies iteration, yielding new problem(s) in its wake. The machine has two options: to terminate at paradox or to iterate endlessly. The meta-philosopher or meta-scientist recognizes that ‘sense’ dictates that this rigorous, methodological progress must transgress in this fashion—either discovery and progress will continue endlessly, or eventually cease to make any sense. Paradox, or infinity—this is the iterative problem of philosophy.

### *Paradoxa*

It seems like this would be a good place to discuss this idea of *paradoxa*. Looking directly at the greek, the prefix *para* means ‘along’ or ‘beside’. Additionally, *doxa* refers to belief, opinion, or ontology. Together, then, we have the concept of something which is alongside, outside, or proximally situated (but not within) a structure of belief. The way in which I would like to use *paradoxa* is to match it closely to the colloquial usage of the word ‘paradox’. This is very much like the way Deleuze discusses ‘paradox’ in *The Logic of Sense*. That is, I intend *paradoxa* to mean something not entirely dissimilar to “outside sense”; sense referring to a semiologico-ontological structure, outside being the conceptual situation of *paradoxa* with respect to sense. More accurately, I would like *paradoxa* to encapsulate sense—its negation in a larger meta-domain. Thus, *paradoxa* in following with the colloquial usage of ‘paradox’ is simply nonsense.

As with many issues it is presumably not that easy. To be rigorous, we should try to say a thing or two about exactly what we mean by ‘sense’. Here there are multiple variant viewpoints, as was the case with the interplay between



language and thought. Some philosophers (such as Frege) differentiate between *sense* and *reference*. This distinction gets complicated on Frege's view, but the basic idea is that there are intrinsic and extrinsic factors in determining the 'meaning' of a linguistic term. The extrinsic factors are the *reference* of the term—those parts of a term which determine truth-functional meaning. A term derives meaning extrinsically by *verifying* it within a semiological structure. Alternatively, the intrinsic factors are the *sense* of the term—those parts of a term which give more than just verifiable truth-functional meaning but rather fit or map into the semiologico-ontological structure without invoking verification within the semiological structure. *Phosphorus* and *Hesperus* both refer to Venus—they have the same referential meaning. To one ignorant of this common referent, their referential meaning still holds—both linguistic terms point to the same object (namely Venus). They mean the same thing extrinsically. Intrinsically they mean something quite different; particularly that *Phosphorus* means the 'Morning Star', and *Hesperus* means the 'Evening Star'. They both refer to Venus, but there is some *sense* to be made out of an apparent difference. It then seems reasonable to say that *reference* is the semiological structure to which *sense* plays the *paradoxastic* role as 'beside' or 'outside' or 'not-pertaining-to' reference within the meta-domain *meaning*.

Others, such as proponents for the Verificationist theory of meaning, restrict the semantical notion of meaning to that which is truth-functionally verifiable within a semiotic structure. On this theory, meaning is simply what we meant by 'reference' in the previous theory; all other 'sense' for which to account is thought of as essentially pragmatic—a function of usage and not related to a term's meaning. *Phosphorus* and *Hesperus* mean the same thing, and that there is more to be said about the astronomical essence and linguistic

difference between the two simply amounts to colloquial understanding and usage of the two relative linguistic terms. Here the potential *paradoxastic* relationship is between semantics and pragmatics. Semantics is the structurization of meaning to which pragmatics plays the *paradoxastic* role as 'beside' or 'outside' or 'not-pertaining-to' semantics within the meta-domain *language*. Here there is no non-linguistic possibility for meaning, so *paradoxa* would have to assume some role within a seemingly more restrictive domain of language (parenthetically speaking, it is most likely of interest to investigate the possible relationship between the cardinalities of the domains of language and thought; but as intriguing as that idea is, it is not within the scope of the domain of this paper).

I had set out to give an account of what comprises *paradoxa*, or how *paradoxa* should be construed without explicitly subscribing to a particular theory of sense or meaning. Oftentimes in philosophy terms tend to only have meaning or make coherent sense within a particular ontological structure (this alludes to the 'problem of context' a topic central to, and discussed later in this paper). Suffice it at this juncture to acknowledge that we must bear in mind to which contexts our terms seem most apt to align sensibly. Recall that our purpose in explicating *paradoxa* was to gain a richer understanding of the 'interplay between language and thought'; more specifically our efforts were to gain comprehension of what is meant when we refer to *concepts*.

### Concepts & Quanta

Let us begin with the idea of *quanta*, and how it applies to concepts. In physics, quanta are the minimum discrete 'packets' of electromagnetic energy transmitted in a quantum event. We'll take this to be the colloquial usage of quanta. In

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a more generalized sense, I'd like to use the notion of quanta as any sort of minimal discrete packaging for transmission.

When we discuss thoughts, ideas, language, intent, usage, and expression, it becomes exceedingly difficult to express a point without invoking the notion of 'concept'. Typically, we differentiate between concepts and objects. Frege made this 'sharp distinction' one of his three guiding principles in understanding language and meaning.

As yet another entry point let us begin with an idea, let's say of a particular smooth, red ball—"that smooth red ball on the table" (gesturing toward the table and in particular the smooth red ball that rests atop). We feel as though there is nothing that can dispute the 'fact' that "I see that particular smooth red ball". But we seem to be able to look even more elementarily than that. It is not necessarily a ball, or a red thing, or a smooth thing, or a thing on a table, etc that we see...but it is a thing; an object, in its simplest sense devoid of all attributes. To some, this seems ludicrous—I cannot *conceive* of this ball without all the attributes of *that particular ball*. What we've tried to do in isolating the simplest (Platonic) Form of the ball, is to abstract away all the attributes of the ball as an effort toward pure objectivity. We have really only done this in an abstract sense—at no point were we ever actually imagining *that ball* without its attributes. When we undertake this task of abstracting away an object's attributes, we're proposing a particular worldview. We're saying what's most basic is object, in one sense. Secondary to object is conceptual attribute, and tertiary is retrospection. Objects then are pure, undifferentiated, existence—a superficial Body Without Organs—Platonic Being—pantheism, *en brute*. Having differentiated sharply between the conceptual attributes of the ball, and the objective ball itself, we now attempt to relocate the ball's identity. We have to do this to recover our subject

(the ball) because we lost all of its distinctions when we abstracted away all attributes. We have an object, undifferentiated, and thus we have only simple *existence*; but we *want* a smooth, round, red ball resting atop *that* table. So we start applying conceptual attributes, we include all things that belong to the intersection of the following sets: smooth things, round things, red things, things on that table, things in that spacio-temporal location, etc. The *quantum-concept* of the ball is the minimized abovementioned intersection of sets. It is a set with a minimum number of elements such that the specific ball in question is *completely described*. So, if we can obtain this quantum-concept, we can proceed to make progress in making sense of all those thoughts, ideas, languages, intentions, usages, and expressions that were so important to a rigorous understanding of language.

Unfortunately this *quantum-concept* proves much more elusive than it seems. For instance, consider the question of how we are to find exactly the right set of conceptual attributes to comprise the quanta. Do we limit the set to specifically those attributes which are public apprehensions? How do we differentiate between which apprehensions might be public and which are private, given that each person has only his/her own judgment criteria? It seems as though we're certainly able to talk about concepts, and apply them sufficiently to function adequately in a linguistic activity; i.e. we all know the reference when I gesture toward the table and say "that smooth, round, red ball resting atop the table over there" so there appears to be a way (at the very least) to 'short-circuit' conceptual reference in order to converse.

Often at this juncture an account of 'competent speakers' of a language is cited as a possible explanation into why it is that this 'short-circuit' seems to work. The basic idea is that there is a way to judge whether a speaker is competent in a

language. Once a speaker is judged as 'competent' in that language he/she may then be assumed to have understood another competent speaker's utterance (and vice versa). Oddly the commonly induced judgment procedure involves assuming the exact phenomenon we set out to explain. 'Competent speakers' are determined as such by looking at whether that speaker's utterances appear to be understood by others, and whether that speaker appears to understand other seemingly competent speakers' utterances. An appeal to intuition that begs the question is hardly a rigorous explanation for this phenomenon. So how are we to account for the apparent success of communication through language—for this short-cut in attaining a quantum concept, and transmitting it in a generally successful way?

One potential answer is that we've gone about things all wrong from the start. We should not have made this distinctive concept-object abstraction in the first place. Now that we've openly rejected one of Frege's fundamental principles (to never lose sight of the distinction between concept and object.) we should question why this distinction was so important to Frege? What price must we now pay? The simple answer is 'none', and this stems from incoherence in Frege's viewpoint. Frege asserted three principles: (i) always separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective; (ii) never ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition; and (iii) never lose sight of the distinction between concept and object. Unfortunately for Frege, it seems that his principles are internally inconsistent. If we are to keep the distinction between concept and object, then we must be rigorous about it. Objects in Frege's formulation, are *names* (or 'signs'). This is not strictly true, as objects are *objects* and names are an abstract linguistic subset of objects. What Frege

meant is that objects are always designated in language by names or signs. But to keep the distinction between concepts and objects we must *actually keep it*—that is, when Frege says that objects are names, he’s already broken with this principle. More explicitly, by being able to say anything about objects at all (namely that they’re ‘names’) we’ve already inadvertently snuck a conceptual attribute into the essence of object. In restricting objects to the purely undifferentiated as we had with the ‘red ball’ example we upheld the principle to the letter; something Frege never did. His project was oriented conversely to ours: he wanted to isolate concept from object, not object from concept. He assumed thought is greater than language (in keeping with principle (i))—again, this is where I’d like to suspend judgment.

Having done away with the distinction between concept and object what we’re left with then seems to be ‘that specific smooth, round, red ball sitting atop that table’. Each and every ‘thing’ is unique and differentiated from every other in its attributes. The ‘thing’ and the ‘attributes’ are identical; we cannot look to one or the other to say what we’re talking about. Then the problem arises: *this is not at all how language works*. When I say “that smooth, round, red, ball” I’ve differentiated. I’ve got a name (ball) and some adjectives (smooth, round, red); it’s not a completely divisive distinction between concept and object, but a distinction nonetheless to some degree. Thus, in order for language to function without necessitating a *complete quantum conceptualization* on this view we must account for degrees of distinction in concept and object. This might be intrinsic to a psychologistic account of human rationality. That is, it may simply be a function of human cognition for us to be able to pick up on the varying degrees of distinction in concept and object within the context of conversation, or any other linguistic activity. Though I feel

like this explanation is of sub par caliber, it is a reasonable one, which would then be left to cognitive scientists to address adequately.

It might also be that computing a complete quantum conceptualization is something that we can, and do carry out without ever being aware of doing so. If this is the case, then we need not worry about the potential elusiveness of apprehending concept. It simply happens. However, there seems to be something about the process of quantum conceptualization which categorically precludes it from ever attaining *complete concept*. A concept in its entirety requires that it is completely determined. In order to completely determine such a thing as a concept (say, of a particular ball) the minimum required intersection of conceptually descriptive sets is still at best of countably infinite cardinality. This is an assertion and an appeal to intuition (hardly rigorous) but also seems undeniable. Categorically speaking, I can conceive of no circumstance whereby I am unable to confuse a finite intersection of conceptually descriptive sets—and thus I am unable to isolate with certainty a complete concept.

Take once again the red ball, for example. Say a proponent for the abovementioned conjecture wanted to prove to me that the intersective set is of finite order by describing all the attributes required to completely apprehend the concept of the ball. He might even concede that it would take him an unreasonable amount of time to complete this task, but that he could finish in finite time. So he starts describing the ball, in all possible ways, covering *all possible* attributes of the ball; after all, if the set is finite, than adding one to the set is also finite, and adding two to the set is also finite...*ad infinitum* (note the paradox). It seems now that he should not over-describe the set—for we need a way of choosing whether an attribute attains and if we over-describe the set there is no

longer any way to go about counting; so let's restrict him to only the necessary elements which will completely describe the concept of the ball. Well, now the problem is in how to decide which elements will accomplish this task. Presumably there will be different ways to completely describe the concept. For instance, one conceivable way might be to give the exact complete physical description of all the states of the atoms which comprise the ball, in conjunction with a precise spacio-temporal description of the ball. Another way might be to give the complete physical description of all the states of the atoms which do *not* comprise the ball, in conjunction with the precise spacio-temporal description of the ball. It would seem like the former set is 'smaller' than the latter, but in practice, the only way to tell is by actually counting all the elements of both sets, and comparing their respective cardinalities. In either case, we presumably have variant complete descriptions—multiple ways of arriving at a complete concept of the ball. If one or another of the set of potential complete descriptions is of finite order, then our proponent is successful. But the problem remains; when he begins describing, how does he know preeminently that he's got a 'correct', finite set of descriptions—a complete, finite descriptive set? In order to prove that the set is finite, we must already assume tractability. In order to apprehend a complete concept, we must already have the complete concept. This conjecture begs the question; its proponent's methods are incapable of being rigorous.

It seems that we're epistemologically mired. We're stuck not-knowing whether the descriptive sets are finite or infinite. If the sets are finite, we're still unsure about how to go about listing all the required elements. If the sets are infinite, we never quite make it to the actual apprehension of a complete concept. In either case, it seems doubtful that we ever do



apprehend complete concepts; that there is something less-rigorous than this lofty project working in linguistic interaction. A short-circuit—but of what? The goal of a ‘complete concept’ appears now as a specter; it is as if we’ve been chasing ghosts attempting to short-circuit something that is not there. We must then abandon the notion of a ‘complete concept’ once and for all. But this erasure does not come without consequence.

I stated at the beginning of this section that *paradoxa* is necessarily a byproduct of quantized concepts. It should now be easy for us to see why. If we wanted the quantization of concepts to be the system by which language effectively communicates, the logical conclusion (as demonstrated) cannot be sensible; instead the understanding (excuse the loose usage of the term) can only be reached outside sense as it were—paradoxically. This suggests that our apparent ability to apprehend concepts occurs outside logical argumentative structure. Therefore it becomes unreasonable to attempt to sensibly justify this understanding.

### **The Abstract Uncertainty Principle**

Let us suppose for the sake of thoroughness that we are unable to speak of concepts. We may think we can speak of concepts, in fact, it seems as though we are currently engaged in such an activity. But we can also speak of a four-sided triangle without being able to conceptualize it. The idea I propose is that speaking of concepts, or supposing their existence in any sense is paradoxical. We may only discuss ‘concept’ superficially; as depth is only a hallucination. This is not to say that nothing is gained from talk of concepts; nor is it to suggest that doing so inaccurately represents the world. I mean neither to suggest the inverse: that discussion of concepts is safe from fallibility. All I suggest is that we should

consider the possibility that concepts do not exist. Paradoxically, to discuss that concepts do not exist, I must suppose that concepts exist. Such is the problem of logical negation: in order to identify what does not exist, we must always have the possibility for its existence. If a purple elephant with green polka-dots does not exist, then I must be able to identify exactly what it is that is not there...but if it is not there, however am I to go about identifying...what? The beauty of incomprehensibility (paradoxicality) is that we needn't worry about 'making sense', and since we've already boxed 'concept' out of the realm of sense, we are unable to have a problem.

What then, might happen if we try to remove this idea of concept from our philosophico-linguistic lexicon? Why not replace [it] with another idea stolen from theoretical physics: Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle?—altered slightly to fit our colloquial purposes. Our principle (which you may've already guessed will be called the *abstract uncertainty principle*) mirrors Heisenberg's, but only in the motivated gloss of a philosopher. The basic Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle shows that it is impossible by experiment to determine simultaneously the momentum and position of a subatomic particle. The important result is Quantum Theory; the idea that our best functional model of subatomic particle physics is probabilistic. If we want an accurate and precise model, we must do something counterintuitive; we must use a model which we know to be false. The result is that all resultant reasoning is restricted from logical deduction—a systematic exclusion from the semiologico-ontological structure of language/thought. Similarly, the *abstract uncertainty principle* takes the same stance on [concepts] (in brackets here and on because we've deleted 'concept from our philosophico-linguistic lexicon) as Heisenberg's principle does on particle physics: each time we

would like to invoke the notion of a particular [concept] we extend a linguistic indexical pointer at it to pin it in its location. We need to do this in order to know exactly what it is to which we are referring. But when the pointer gets to the probabilistic vicinity of the [concept] we find that it either misses the target, or in hitting the target simultaneously displaces the [concept]. Either way we've got false coordinates. As with Quantum Theory, we might then take a pragmatic approach and do something counterintuitive in order to rescue our efforts. If we want to salvage an intuitive understanding of how language works we might reformulate how we think of [concepts] to a quantum-like model which bears no resemblance to reality. This model gives conceptual meaning in probabilistic 'clouds'. Each time we feel we've understood a linguistic utterance, what we've really done is a qualitative probability calculation yielding a suggested potential understanding. When we *know* what we're talking about we've got a *strongly* suggested potential understanding.

### **Inventory (Interlude to Contextuality)**

Let us now pause to recapitulate. We've found though our investigation of the notion of concept that it is either exiled to the realm of paradoxa, or that we must remove it from our lexicon, replacing it with an unrealistic quantum-like model. Both ideas have their pros and cons, and either idea appeals to proponents of different linguistic theories. Recall, my goal is to investigate what it is to make 'sense' and how this relates linguistically to such notions as 'context' and 'meaning'. We have hitherto addressed meaning and sense and their relation to each other linguistically. What remains to be discussed of this goal, then, is how the notion of context relates linguistically to the logically structural idea of sense. Let us

now reset our focus toward context and continue with our investigation.

### **What Vagueness Lurks in the Contexts of Words...**

Context is probably one of the most elusive notions expressed by language. The reasons for this are also particularly elusive, and as such it becomes extremely difficult to even approach a fruitful way of considering the idea of context. The word *context*, in and of itself, often carries what I believe to be a flawed faux-conception which is propagated within the essence of almost every facet of language. It is for this reason that I find it utterly vital that the concept of context be thoroughly investigated. If context is systematically misunderstood, the widespread implications would serve to elucidate (my hope is at least in some meaningful way) a more accurate picture of what we are actually attempting to do when we 'communicate'.

### **Communication**

Let us first begin by contemplating what it is we are actually doing when we say that we are 'communicating'. In the most basic sense what we would like to be doing is transferring perfectly an idea from one ego to another. My language here might seem a little bit opaque; transfer, idea, ego. The understanding of these terms is important, and I would like to express them as accurately as I find possible; though through this examination of the essence of context one goal I hope to accomplish is in showing that what we think we mean by words is never evident, and further that what we think we mean by context is never evident either. Thus my hope for the reader's understanding of terms like 'transfer', 'idea', and 'ego' is really nothing more than the same hope that I am describing for this [unattainably] *perfect*

communication. This is not to say that language, as it were, is utterly hopeless—the true essence, if any, which I wish to express here, is that it is exactly *hope* and *imagination* which saves us from complete despondent isolation. But for the moment we should return to ‘communication’.

### **The notion of Ego**

When I speak or write of ‘ego’ what I mean is “that thing which one believes is one’s self”. When I isolate what makes me *me*, I have then identified what I mean by ego. There are volumes that can (and have) been written about the nature of ‘identity’ (another word which I would like to say as synonymous to what I denote herewith in as ‘ego’) but that is not the focus of this study. For my purpose we shall, for the time being, have to content ourselves with what we *feel* we understand when we read what I have written. Statements like the previous embody the true spirit of my conception of context. Then, when I speak or write about the communication of egos, it assumes that there must be another entity which I have identified as having the same essence as the ‘ego’ which has defined my experience—others identify too.

### **The notion of Idea**

Idea is in many ways similar to the notion of ego. Ideas, however, are particularly elusive on my understanding because they appear to me as having no comprehensible boundary—so in saying the word ‘idea’ or ‘ideas’ there is already a tension. The actual word ‘idea’ seems to designate a discrete packaging of something—that there is a [temporal or conceptual] beginning and end; that there is and can be a difference between this idea and that one. I am not going to deny these conceptualizations of the word ‘idea’ but am rather

more interested in recognizing that these *have the potential* to be inaccurate representations of what we mean to conceive when we conceptualize 'idea'. If we find that this notion of idea actually misrepresents what we really *mean* to say, then we've recognized a failure of speech and of language. The very notion that I *can* accidentally misrepresent my 'ideas' potentiates insights into "cracks in our linguistic foundation". Suffice it to say that when I speak of 'idea' I have not put my finger on anything in particular—I am invoking *something* without identifying it. Here my words fail me again, as I can recognize that there is, in fact, *no thing* which can be identified (this is the very purpose of the original expression). Perhaps more accurately though also more misleading I should have said "I am invoking *nothing*"; which raises the question as to whether no-thing is even 'invokable'. If not, what have I actually accomplished by uttering the phrase? It *feels* like I meant something where there was really nothing for me to have meant at all.

### **The notion of Transfer**

In the same sense as above we must question how we are to consider the meaning of the word 'transfer' in a given 'context'. The picture is of some invisible, indefinite, boundary-less 'thing' (which is not anything) traveling (in some way) from one ego (which is also not anything) to another ego (which is by definition fundamentally separated from the first ego). One can easily see that there is much confusion in this simple utterance: "transferring perfectly an idea from one ego to another". When we read something of this nature we should be flagging it, identifying it for what it is (extremely troublesome and confusing) and stopping ourselves from continuing without understanding fully what we've read. What could 'transferring' possibly mean in this

context? Nothing, it seems is being transferred, and it seems like there are no places to or from whence the nothing travels. It looks then as if when we say we are communicating that there is actually nothing happening. But then how do we account for this feeling of ‘having communicated’? And how does this really connect with an impression of a truer sense of context?

Maybe it would first behoove us to acknowledge that the sense of ‘communication’ that I had outlined above grossly misrepresents what is actually occurring—that what I’ve done is exaggerated an ill-conceived model to represent the work of communication. I should admit that was my intention, but had only elucidatory intent. By learning to recognize the somewhat veiled complexities of simple statements, we might better ourselves in our own communication methods. But how? It feels like there is no escaping these types of inaccuracies and confusions in language. How can we hope to improve what appears to be an inherently flawed system? My response is that simply by recognizing and acknowledging the fact of its confounded complexity we have overcome much of the problem of language.

### **Ostensible Meaning**

Words appear to have meaning. The reason for this is that we attribute ‘definition’ to them, and take definition as being the meaning of words, in lieu of any other sense of meaning. What I am saying here is that, for example, when I use the word “bat” I have taken the word bat to have meaning in some sense. In using a word, its power or force is in that it is being used *for* some purpose—to convey a meaning. It is worth noting that the word “bat” in-and-of itself cannot possibly *mean* anything at all—that is, were I simply to utter “bat” no one would understand what I meant. “Bat” could

just be a vocal noise I produced, or it could be a word—a signifier; but without pre-determining some sort of relational status this signifier cannot do the job of signifying anything at all. Enter the meta-concept of ‘context’. Firstly, I call ‘context’ a “meta-concept” because it applies in instances where we feel that we cannot gain meaning independent of its invocation. An example might then demonstrate context more clearly as follows: I cannot discern the meaning of “bat” isolated from context, but in context it could garner meaning. But what is context? “Bat” can take on many meanings in ‘different contexts’ and so in order to be able to discern the ‘proper’ or ‘appropriate’ meaning we must first understand how this context operator/function works. Let us work with three different ‘contexts’ of the word “bat”:

1. “Ozzy bit the head off that bat!”
2. “Casey placed the bat at home plate.”
3. “Casey is at the bat.”

At first glance the differences between the three sentences above are purely grammatical. Note that I chose only to explore the usage of “bat” as noun. In the first context, bat refers to a mammal of the subclass *Placentalia*, order *Chioptera*. The bat is a thing, but a specific type of thing—a furry mammal. More specifically, the ‘bat’ in (1) is individual, we’re not talking about any member of the order *chioptera*; we’re specifically discussing the particular individual which resides in Ozzy’s mouth at a particular moment. This is different from the noun “bat” used in (2). Similar to (1) ‘bat’ refers to a thing—in this case an elongated wooden shaft. Here ‘bat’ evokes more than just an object; the word has additional predicative connotation. The bat is not only an elongated wooden shaft, it is a particular type of wooden shaft which is shaped in a particular way, and has a particular *use*. The use of the bat can take on different contexts as well:



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2a. "Casey placed the bat at home plate after having struck out."

2b. "James tried to walk in a straight line after revolving about the bat."

2c. "When Karl heard the noise, he grabbed his bat for protection."

Here we are working with the same item, a baseball bat, but it functions in each context in a different way. (2a) has it as a tool for playing baseball, (2b) uses the bat more generically as an axle for a game of balance, and (2c) represents the baseball bat as a defensive weapon. In all three, we might evoke the same or similar image of a bat, but invoke that image in a different way. I might arbitrarily change the image of the bat and the function will remain the same:

2a\*. "Casey placed the cedar Louisville Slugger at home plate."

2b\*. "James tried to walk in a straight line after revolving about the cricket bat."

2c\*. "When Karl heard the noise, he grabbed his aluminum baseball bat."

Now our images of the bats have changed, but the use of the bat in each instance remains the same as before. The point of this thought experiment is that context changed in each of these instances. In each instance we also changed the words which comprised the context, but this is not necessary. Suppose I wanted to express an idea similar to (2a\*), I might only think to express this idea by saying (2). I had a more descriptive 'idea' and expressed it in a less-descriptive manner. This should reveal a property of communication which acts as a limitation: incompleteness. If I wanted to communicate the exact sense of gazing out a window on a beautiful Saturday in November, I should now recognize that I would never be able to fully describe the exact situation; and

because I cannot describe the exact situation no listener could possibly have attained the exact situation. In other words, because exact context can never be obtained by language, idea transfer from ego to ego *through* language is at best serendipitous and imperfect, and at worst hopelessly impossible.

### **Language as Gestalt Philosophy**

We now face a grim outlook: we're forced to question whether we are really unable to acquire *anything at all* through the process of linguistic communication. But perhaps the outlook is more nuanced than this bivalent judgment. It feels as though there is still the possibility of acquiring *something* through a communicative act, though maybe not what one had hoped to acquire—the transfer of ideas from one ego to another ego. Though we may not value such an idea as greatly as idea transfer, it could be that what one has acquired through this communicative process is simply his or her own thoughts or ideas; or perhaps the chance to engage one's self in the act of thinking with the help of a 'communicative partner'. For instance: if Fred tried to communicate to James that "Casey placed the cedar Louisville Slugger at home plate." *only* by saying "Casey placed the bat at home plate", the only thing James can hope to receive from this linguistic communication is that "Casey placed the bat at home plate" or some variant. Any further contextualization that occurs must come purely from James—that is, if James happens to visualize Casey placing a cedar Louisville Slugger at the same home plate as Fred was attempting to describe, this happened not as a result of the language used, but as a result of James' own imagination—the similarity between Fred's and James' views is either serendipitous or uncanny.

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In this sense, it seems as though 'context' is the type of thing which cannot be properly transmitted through linguistic expression. In fact, it also appears as though context is never duly attained by the expresser either. If we look to context as a functional distillation of the content of a proposition (i.e. a function which maps referential meaning of a sentence to sensible meaning of a proposition), the most logical question to ask then is "What new meaning have we now acquired by applying the context rule?" In order for context to be able to yield to the proposition *meaning* the application of a contextual rule must then be able to carry or transform meaning—in essence, efforts enacted to contextualize must have the result of bringing meaning to a proposition where there was none before. And this appears to make sense. When I take the utterance in (3) "Casey is at the bat" I may feel as though there is something amiss. "Bat" here seems to be used in an entirely different way, and I may not be able to imagine a proper usage. I am faced with two options: to either categorize the sentence as nonsensical, or to search into the context of (apply the function 'context' to) the sentence and imagine what a proper usage might yield meaningfully. Here too it seems as though context might be inadequate, as I am able to imagine multiple contexts (the function 'context' maps elements of a domain to multiple elements in a co-domain) in which the proposition in (3) could make sense. For instance, I could've interpreted "Casey is at the bat" to designate a particular (but as-of-yet ambiguous) locus as in "Casey is at the bat, which is between the football and the basketball". Or I might have interpreted the proposition as responding to "Up to which item in the inventory has Casey completed?" ... "Casey is at the bat." As well as the seemingly more-obvious "Who is currently up to bat?" ... "Casey is at the bat". The point that I wish to make, is that a proposition does not select its proper

context; we must do that for ourselves, and we must also be creative and imaginative about the contexts which we select. Moreover, I have the potential to choose an ‘incorrect’ context—that is, I can select a context wherewith-in a larger propositional scope this context becomes problematic to my understanding. The existence of this potential presents a dire consequence for ‘context’ as a function of propositional meaning because we must continually verify whether we’ve ascertained a proper cohesive context by checking it up against a context operating on a larger scope, and now checking *that* context up against another, *ad infinitum*—as the saying goes “it’s turtles all the way down”.

### **Groundlessness**

So if we want context to act as a functional mapping from meaningless sentences to meaningful propositions, we’ve got to assume at some point that we have a proper context without verification; forcing us to acknowledge that *meaning is ungrounded* within the confines of linguistic expression. The implied idea here is essentially that the only true sense of context is restricted specifically to the moment of occurrence. What I mean here is that since context can never duly be attained by formulating linguistic expression the only place proper context can occur is in the original position of the idea. If I wanted to communicate the exact sense of gazing out a window on a beautiful Saturday in November, the proper context could only be found in the moment that I am actually gazing out that window—in all its infinite, inexpressible detail, or ineffable lack thereof.

The view I espouse here is this: the fact that a specific idea miraculously happened to transfer exactly to Fred when I attempted communicating it is, at best, no more than simply a chance occurrence. But perhaps we are operating on an

inaccurate notion of 'ego'. Earlier we had defined in a certain sense what it would mean for an ego to consider itself in juxtaposition with another ego. We defined ego such that it was "that thing which one believes is one's self". On this definition, the implication was that egos necessarily operate as freestanding entities—my ego cannot be linked in any way to yours because if it was there would be no me-you boundary; and because I can feel this boundary, it must exist. The way I had originally conceived of this boundary, I considered it in the sense that if I look at my left hand and think in a certain way, I can get that hand to pick up a pen and make controlled marks on a piece of paper. I cannot enact the same type of action if I had looked at Fred's left hand and desired to will it to pick up a pen and make controlled marks on a piece of paper. So if I had wanted the entity that I call Fred to be considered as a similar entity as what I consider myself (both Fred and I having 'egos') I had to imagine that Fred 'perceives', at least in some abstract sense, the same way as I do. However, I simply do not have access to that particular perception (and vice versa); and as such, there is no way of determining similarity in perception. Thus the boundary between Fred/ego, and me/ego either exists or is indeterminable.

### **A Possible Red-Herring**

Alternatively, I can also imagine a sort of "collective unconscious" which would act as an ego-inaccessible communication link that operates between egos as a medium through which exact or close-to exact ideas can be transferred. If this is the case, than it is by virtue of this "collective unconscious", and not by virtue of the essence of language which allows for the transference of ideas. Since here I am only concerned with the work that is done by language (and in

particular the sense of context within the workings of language) any argument concerning or necessitating this sort of telepathic exchange cannot have bearing on my conclusions.

On the other hand, if in order to communicate we require the sensibility of context in order to determine the sensibility of words (i.e. if context is necessitated by words in order to have meaning) then it is evident that we are in a dire situation with respect to sense or meaning. Since a proper or exact context can be reached neither by the expresser nor by the interpreter of an attempted linguistic communication, we are always, in a sense reaching into a cloud of potential meanings, hoping to grasp something concrete, and returning empty-handed.

### **Beyond Thunderdome**

It is of some interest at this juncture to speak about what is changed, if anything, by philosophical endeavor. Surely something is gained, as is the case in any field when one sets out to learning. Indeed the entire concept of learning turns on the continual amassment of thought power and ceaseless broadening of the frontiers of understanding in a general sense. But even here I find myself using terminology I'd like to avoid. To speak of the 'frontiers' of understanding is to acknowledge and draw these boundaries. In general then, it could be understood by this paper that boundaries are the only enemy, if an enemy is to be identified. The process of identification too is the process of boundary-making; so in a more generalized and abstracted philosophical sense I am championing a de-identification process—or at least some way of loosening or breaking the ties that structurize, categorize, boundary, and box ourselves into a limited existence (determinate though undetermined). The superseding point hitherto eludes: the goal of my philosophy is admittedly

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critical and in a superficial sense non-constructive. But if one is to understand me, he must then also recognize that I take 'construction' to be the wrong way of building. If we begin baseless and ungrounded, how can we proceed in a directed and contingent way and have the audacity to believe in our work? Metaphorically speaking, I am advocating the powerful erosive powers of atmosphere—testing the foundations with all of the existent elements of chaos. Pouring sand is a way of building without structurizing: the wind blows the sand and kicks up the dust, churning and tumbling all the heterogeneous elements to fall where they may. This chaotic amalgam is what I understand to be true to life, and it is *this* overbearing paradoxastic truth that I would like to extend to philosophical enterprise.

Philosophy is coming to grips with a world subsumed by chaos—it seems only reasonable that philosophy mirror such a world. The sense then, to be made of this chaotic world is a chaotic sense; a paradoxical sense. Just as building cages is not the ideal method for investigating the behavior of wild animals; philosophy should not be conducted by building structures and theories to investigate the essence of reality. Like the scientist who either searches indefinitely, or quits in confusion at the edges of understanding, the philosopher is faced with the boundlessness of unanswerable questions (it occurs that a question may be no question at all, if it is in its essence unanswerable—a problem entails a solution, a question entails an answer, etc) or stopping-short by using a structural theory to force-fit an amorphous reality.