LANGUAGE, LOGIC, AND PHILOSOPHY

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 4th INTERNATIONAL WITTGENSTEIN SYMPOSIUM
28th AUGUST TO 2nd SEPTEMBER 1979, KIRCHBERG/WECHSEL (AUSTRIA)

SPRACHE, LOGIK UND PHILOSOPHIE

AKTEN DES 4. INTERNATIONALEN WITTGENSTEIN SYMPOSIUMS
28. AUGUST BIS 2. SEPTEMBER 1979, KIRCHBERG/WECHSEL (ÖSTERREICH)

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It is reported by Moore in his account of Wittgenstein's Lectures of 1930—33 that Wittgenstein expressed approval of a remark by Lichtenberg to the effect that instead of saying 'I think' we ought to say 'it thinks', 'it' being used as 'es' is used in 'es blitzt'.[1] Note that Wittgenstein did not argue, as some have concluded from the most readily available English translation of 'es denkt' that we should say instead of 'I think': 'there is thinking'.[2] There is indeed a plausible existential interpretation of sentences such as 'es blitzt', 'il pleut', 'it hungreth me', . . ., but certainly in English and German, at least for a very wide variety of cases, this is neither the only possible nor the most natural interpretation.

Wittgenstein's remark is just one example of an appeal by a modern thinker to an onto-logical, psychological and grammatical problem having a long and varied history, the problem of impersonalia. Other examples are provided *en masse* by Karl Kraus in his writings on *Sprachlehre*—in particular in the collection of pieces entitled "Subjekt und Prädikat" and in his brilliant essay "Es" (1921)[3] which forms the original inspiration of the present paper. The problem was important also for Brentano and his followers and for the early practitioners of linguistic phenomenology.[4] Here I want merely to demonstrate by means of some sketchy historical reflections why there is a problem of impersonalia at all.

It is of course a problem only for the proponents of the classical subject-predicate/sub-stance-accident metaphysical schemata, which have by now lost their respectability in the eyes of the bulk of philosophers. Yet these schemata formed the common background of almost all Western philosophers up to the time of Wittgenstein. They can be discerned not only in the writings of classical authors such as Descartes, against whose formulation of the theory of (non-corporeal) substance Lichtenberg's remark was principally directed. They occur also in the philosophical ontologies of thinkers as diverse as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Leibniz and Bolzano, and even Meinong and Husserl.

The extent to which Wittgenstein managed to free himself from these schemata is, to me at least, unclear. Here the role played by grammar in the classical framework is decisive: if Frege and the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* are justified in their claim to have broken with the logical grammar of subject and predicate and to have developed an adequate alternative in terms of a somehow radically different relation of function and argument, then the view of Wittgenstein as a philosopher standing outside the tradition may well be a defensible one. Here however I need take no position in this regard, since my aim is merely to present the classical schemata insofar as they are relevant to the problem of impersonal sentences, and to leave the reader to draw his own conclusions.

It will be useful to present these schemata side by side with an account of their quite peculiar institutional status. For it is in virtue of the fact that for so long there was entrenched so heavily in schools and universities across virtually the whole of Europe a more or less faithful, more or less rigidified Aristotelianism or scholasticism, that the above mentioned philosophers, for all their originality, do indeed have so much in common. Each constructed his philosophical grammar, ontology and psychology using what was effectively a pre-determined set of component parts: in some variants one or more of these parts were awarded priority over others, in other variants certain kinds of parts were denied existence altogether. All manner of beast was thereby brought to birth, but each, I want to claim, had an identical philosophical ancestry.

This communal construction kit and the partially fixed, partially fluid philosophical scaffolding which it determined was presented in its crudest possible form in the grammar books of Latin and Greek which formed so important a part of the drill-material of the original monastic institutions and of the classical *Gymnasia* which took their place. Every student of grammar learned that the simplest form of judgment contains as a matter of necessity two mutually correlative constituent parts, a subject and a predicate, that isolated presentations or words expressing isolated presentations do not suffice to constitute a judgment. For this *connection* (or, in the case of negative judgments, a *separation*) of presentation (or correlated linguistic units) is required.

Upon this basis or on parallel ontological and psychological bases virtually all other disciplines were erected. As late as 1883, in his *Ursprung sittlicher Erkenntnis* (pp. 116 f.), Brentano characterised the classical account of judgment as

> a prejudice which has over thousands of years become ever more deeply rooted, a theory which has infiltrated even the elementary schools, . . . and upon which so much else depends that the weight of the load, so to speak, makes the underlying thesis undisplaceable.

In all that follows it will be necessary to bear in mind that we are dealing with a crude text-book version of a complex and sometimes sophisticated system of variant theories (nominalistic, conceptualistic, monadistic, and so on). This core theory is of interest however, since it will enable us to present a relatively simple, if then still provisional account of the issue at hand.

It is possible to distinguish not only a core (or text-book) grammar, but also a core ontology and a core psychology, presented, for example in Aristotle's works or in an oblique way in successive stages of the educational process in the textbooks of other disciplines, particularly theology, biology and jurisprudence.[5] Fundamental to the core ontology was the thesis that the states of affairs which make sentences true must contain, as a matter of necessity, at least two components (normally a substance and an accident) mirroring the components of the corresponding judgements; fundamental to the core psychology the thesis that it must be possible to distinguish a correlative multiplicity of components in the mental acts in which sentences are asserted, and so on.

Already within the purely grammatical sphere we can see the sense in which a problem is raised for the core model by sentences such as 'es blitzt', 'it thinks', and so on, in that for none of these sentences can we isolate a subject which would become united with the corresponding predicates in the manner required if (the utterers of) these sentences are properly to be acknowledged as expressing judgments. The existential solution to this problem was by far the most popular—though here again we have to distinguish a number of distinct variants. For example Bolzano's reading of 'es schneit' as: 'Die Vorstellung von einem Schneefall in der jetzigen Zeit hat Gegenständlichkeit' (the presentation or idea of a current fall of snow has the character of objecthood), or Steinthal's (later retracted) reading of 'es blitzt' as: 'a certain content, namely that which lies in the root *Blitz*, is put forward as existing energy' (ist als seiende Energie hingestellt), that is:[6]

$$Blitz - t$$
$$(S) \quad (p)$$

But quite apart from the philosophical sleight of hand which is involved in treating 'exists' and similar terms as predicates, the existential account loses its attractiveness in showing itself inadequate to deal with all but a very small number of impersonalia. Consider, for example, 'es fehlt an Geld', or 'es ist Wurst'. In the former case at least, the English translation 'there is a lack of money' seems on the face of it to support the existential reading,—until we reflect on the absurdity of the idea that the world might contain not only money, snow, and sausages, but also shortages, absences, and Wurst.

It was not until the 19th century that philosophers began to pay systematic attention to the

problem of impersonalia. The classical grammarians had been content to appeal either to the existential interpretation or to regard impersonalia as modified variants of more tractable sentences, differing from the latter only in some insignificant, formal sense (and here it was possible for them to appeal to the fact that in the writings of Homer the subjectless form of the meteorologica is hardly to be found: it is Zeus who, in each case, rains, blows, thunders, or snows).

Zeus himself of course gradually lost popularity amongst grammarians as a candidate subject for impersonalia, though Spinoza still found it possible to defend the view that the single subject of each and every sentence is the one true God. Some of the intuitions underlying the Zeus-type view have nevertheless remainded alive amongst the speakers of Indo-European languages: they are clearest, perhaps, in regard to sentences such as 'the wind blows' where the quasi-personal character of the subject is bound up with the apparent meaningfulness of the idea that the wind might continue to exist whilst also not blowing. In virtue of these intuitions these languages have retained certain structural properties, some of them of a highly subtle character, properties which have unfortunately been all too readily dismissed by grammarians to whom the underlying classical (Aristotelian, scholastic, Judaeo-Christian, patriarchal) forms of life have become alien.

It is no accident that it was Karl Kraus, who fought so hard to forestall the erosion of the classical—that is to say, of what he conceived as the natural—patterns of thought, who came nearest amongst modern theorists of language to uncovering these properties, especially in his writings on the impersonalia. The full title of his 1921 essay "Es (Abdeckung des Subjekts)" is almost impossible to translate into English. 'Abdecken' here has first af all the connotation of marking out or delineating or putting an exactly fitting lid (Abdeckplatte) on a field of interest: 'Abdeckung' signifies also a covering or a keeping track of something, e.g. of one's debts or, at least today, of one's opposite number on a football field. But most importantly it signifies lifting the covers *off* something. In fact Kraus in this essay is attempting to strip away the sheets of modern, mechanical ways of thinking, to reveal the subtle, intricate web of minute connections which lie beneath, connections, which constitute the natural order of thought, and therewith also the natual order of the world as a whole.

This natural world is mirrored or reflected in precisely those nuances of language which had, in Kraus's eyes, been ignored by over-regimentative grammarians and philosophers. The uncovering of the minute web of connections in the world, the *Ab-* or *Aufdeckung der Natur* is thereby also an *Ab-* or *Aufdeckung des Subjekts*, or an *Abdekantieren* of the subject from the predicate, in precisely the classical grammatical sense. Indeed it has been little remarked the extent to which *Sprachlehre*, for Kraus, rested on the use of instruments of the classical subject-predicate grammatical tradition.

Now naturally there are certain back alleys of language, where the subject is especially difficult to locate; this suggests one possible transposition of the parantheses of Kraus's title into the language of detective fiction as: 'Covering the Case'—where it is of course important to note that 'case' here, like 'Fall' in German, has not only a jurisprudential and a medical but also a grammatical meaning.[7]

Kraus castigates the 'regimentative grammarians' who have never truly *thought through* this 'es' and who are therefore content to regard it in all its occurrences within impersonalia as a syntactical dummy word. Such grammarians, he argues "have not the slightest presentiment of how, in every form of its mechanical use, this 'es' remains an organism, pervaded by and bound to the life of the spirit".[8] Certainly there are merely formal occurrences of 'es', for example 'es beginnt der Tag', 'es zogen drei Burschen zum Tore hinaus', or even 'it remembreth me upon my youth'. These can readily be transformed into, for example, 'der Tag beginnt',—but Kraus is enraged by the assumption that such transformations can be automatically effected in every case. He conceives an almost infinitely complex multiplicity of forms of impersonalia, from 'it is raining'—where already "der Wiener Greuelscherz 'Sie regnet' spürt das Subjekt der Tätigkeit: Die Natur"[9]—to 'Es werde Licht'—where, as Kraus puts it, 'es'

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is just as truly a subject, as in the beginning was the word. It is the most powerful subject in the realm of creation, that which became light, which becomes day, which is about to become evening. (Everything depends upon it; everything can become a relative clause.) It: chaos, the heavenly sphere, the universe, the most powerful, most strongly felt, which is already there before that which in the beginning arose out of it. Light, day, evening are not subjects (as the grammarian assumes in his straightforward way), but predicates; cannot be subjects, because 'it' first of all 'becomes' light, day, evening, unfolds itself thereto.[10]

I find it difficult to reject out of hand this reading of 'es werde Licht', and I do not see either that similar readings ought not properly to be provided for certain other types of impersonalia if all grammatically relevant nuances are to be preserved. That the magnitude of the task of producing an adequate theory of impersonalia is thereby increased to almost unmanageable proportions[11] ought not to lead to the temptation to yield once more to a reductivist, regimentative account. But nor, either, ought it to dissuade the linguistic phenomenologist—as it dissuaded a Kraus or a Wittgenstein—from seeking to produce such a theory, even at the cost of honest toil in areas (such as the philosophy of meteorology) which have hitherto not been counted amongst the most glamorous branches of the discipline of philosophy.

ENDNOTES

[1] Moore, G. E., *Philosophical Papers* (London 1959), p. 309.
[2] Cf. e.g. von Wright's article on Lichtenberg in Edward's *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 4 (New York 1967).
[3] Both these essays are published in Kraus's *Die Sprache* (Munich 1954).
[4] Cf. especially Brentano's review of the classic study *Subjektlose Sätze* (Vienna 1883) by Franz Miklosich, published as an appendix to *Vom Ursprung sittlicher Erkenntnis* (Leipzig 1889). Also Marty's "Über subjektlose Sätze und das Verhältnis der Grammatik zu Logik und Psychologie" (1884—95), repr. in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II (Halle 1918). Amongst the phenomenological writings see especially Pfänder's *Logik* (Halle 1921), p. 200 ff.; Reinach, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Halle 1921), p. 117 ff.; and Ammann, "Zum deutschen Impersonale", *Husserl Festschrift* (Halle 1929), p. 1 ff.
[5] On the role of jurisprudence in central European thought see my "On the production of ideas: some notes on Austrian intellectual history from Bolzano to Meinong", in: *Structure and Gestalt: Philosophy and Literature in Austria-Hungary* (Amsterdam 1980) and the references there given.
[6] Cf. Marty (1918), p. 24 n. 1.
[7] On the parallelism of logical and jurisprudential terms in European languages see my "Law and Eschatology in Wittgenstein's Early Thought", *Inquiry*, vol. 21 (1978), pp. 425 ff.
[8] Kraus (1954), p. 289.
[9] Kraus (1954), p. 293.
[10] Kraus (1954), p. 77.
[11] Cf. Ammann (1929), esp. pp. 3 ff.

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SCHRIFTENREIHE DER WITTGENSTEIN–GESELLSCHAFT

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