

FOREWORD

Three central features of a dominant form of twentieth-century philosophy were an obsession with the problem of language, the belief that that problem was a new discovery of twentieth-century philosophy, and the idea that the problem of language challenged the very possibility of philosophy, at least philosophy in its most ambitious form, that is to say, in the tradition originating in ancient Greece.

The so-called linguistic turn reflected a wider cultural phenomenon which included modernism in the fine arts and literature, placing form on an equal footing with content in the understanding and the experience of an artistic event, but which also included a wide and deep disillusionment with the social and personal significance of ideas, especially ideas of the most general kind.

What Herbert Marcuse called the masochism of twentieth-century philosophers came to seem something much more than that, when general ideas seemed to demonstrate their own invalidity, not to say their iniquity, as they were used and abused in the making and management of pathological societies, especially totalitarian societies. General ideas as ideology had seemed to condemn finally the idea of general ideas as a means of human self-perfecting.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are able to see that the tribulations of twentieth-century philosophy may have had a significant therapeutic value. A postlinguistic turn might enable us to form a better understanding of the role of language in the forming and communication of human consciousness. And a post-ideological turn may enable us to form a better understanding of the role of ideas in society.

The problems of philosophy, including the problem of philosophy, are now urgently present in relation not only to the formation of national societies, where they have always been relevant, but also in relation to the constituting of international society, the society of all societies. The role of language in the making of consciousness and society reaches its limiting case in the making of universal human consciousness and universal human society. Philosophy might even now be able to claim a universality which is not merely logical but also practical.

It is in the intellectual context of the new possibility of philosophy, and the great new challenge facing philosophy, that I place Stéphane Beaulac's important book. His work takes advantage, in particular, of several of the hard-earned lessons of twentieth-century philosophy and social experience.

We now see that the problem of language is as old as philosophy itself. If, as Hegel suggested, philosophy is the thinking of thinking, then it can never have ignored the way in which thinking is expressed and communicated. In his Introduction to Jeremy Bentham's *Theory of Fictions*, C.K. Ogden, who is himself a significant figure in Beaulac's intellectual schema, even enlists Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley and Hume in a possible reassessment of the history of philosophy which would focus on what Ogden calls their ability to recognize the linguistic basis of philosophy. We now also see that not only ideas, but also the words in which ideas are expressed, are themselves historical phenomena. Word-ideas have their own history.

And, finally, we cannot escape the daunting fact that ideas, and the words in which they are expressed, are primary social forces, not merely as surface phenomena but, within the dynamic Marxian model of social development, as forces as powerful as those flowing from the material basis of social relations.

As word-ideas are formed by social consciousness they form social consciousness. It is not enough to condemn such words as 'sovereignty', 'state' and 'nation', or even 'law' and 'international law', as essentially illusion, fiction, or mythology, if we understand the profound significance of the products of our richly creative minds as they participate in the continuous self-constituting of human societies.

We may remember Herbert Marcuse's conclusion – summarising, as it were, the essence of Beaulac's project. 'The hypostatized whole resists analytic dissolution, not because it is a mythical entity behind particular entities and performances but because it is the concrete objective ground of their functioning in the given social and historical context. As such, it is a real force, felt and expressed by individuals in their actions, circumstances, and relationships.'

Or else we may recall Peter Winch's rejection of an aspect of Karl Popper's passionate anti-ideologism. The word 'war' is not merely an explanatory model. It is a concept which belongs essentially to the behaviour of those involved in war and helps to determine that behaviour.

Much has been written, and is being written, about the deep-structural changes which are taking place in the nature of international society and about the historical origins of its existing features. The historiography of international ideology, of the idea-forces of international society, is responding to what seems to be the dissolving of a traditional international landscape. Should we cling to the old categories – of sovereignty and state and law, among so many others? Should we reinterpret the old categories? Should we find new categories to match the new realities?

One of the most exciting aspects of Stéphane Beaulac's work is that he demonstrates that such has been the permanent condition and perennial challenge, not only for the holders of public power who seek to use the categories as instruments to serve their own purposes of social power, but also for those whose task in the social division of labour is to think about ideas and whose thinking, however theoretical and seemingly detached, is liable itself to become an active social force.

Work of this kind is not merely a relativising of leading word-ideas. It is not merely saying that word-ideas have an uncertain and changing content. By helping us to understand the role of word-ideas in the formation of social reality, it is, or should be, an empowering enterprise, enabling us to contribute more effectively to the overwhelmingly complex process by which societies, and now even international society, constitute themselves from day to day within human consciousness.

Philip Allott
Trinity College, Cambridge
September 2003