

# What Philosophers Really Know

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**Philosophy of Language: The Classics Explained** by Colin McGinn. MIT Press, 225 pp., \$35.00

Academic philosophy often draws ire. The complaints are twofold and not altogether consistent with each other.

The first is that philosophers can't seem to agree on anything, with discussion descending to such basic questions as the nature of the field itself, both its subject matter and its methodology. The lack of unanimity implies a lack of objectivity and suggests that any hope for progress is futile. This complaint often comes from scientists and culminates in the charge that there is no such thing as philosophical expertise. Who then are these people employed in philosophy departments, and what entitles them to express subjective viewpoints with the pretensions of impersonal knowledge?

The second complaint is that academic philosophy has become inaccessible. For more than a century now, the kind of philosophy practiced in most philosophy departments, at least in the English-speaking world, is analytic philosophy, and analytic philosophy, or so goes the lament, is too technical, generating vocabularies and theories aimed at questions remote from problems that outsiders consider philosophical. Here the complaint is that there *are* philosophical experts and that, in carrying the field forward, they have excluded the nonprofessional. The suppressed premise is that philosophical questions are of concern to all of humanity and therefore ought to remain within reach of all of humanity.

Analytic philosophy originated with philosophers who also did seminal work in mathematical logic, most notably Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, and the alliances with both formal logic and science are among its defining features. As such, analytic philosophy values conceptual clarity and argumentative precision, its techniques are developed in their service, and it condemns the turgid language (and, perhaps not coincidentally, the indifference or hostility to science) characteristic of what many people think of as philosophy. Hegelian idealism was the prototype of what early analytic philosophers thought philosophy should not be, and today such thinkers as Martin Heidegger and Slavoj Žižek have stepped into that role.

Philosophy of language has been, from the beginning, close to the center of analytic philosophy, and Colin McGinn's *Philosophy of Language: The Classics Explained* plunges one into philosophy as it is actually practiced by a majority of Anglo-American philosophers. Anyone who is put off by philosophy's technical turn might be ill-disposed toward McGinn's book. But I hope this pellucid exposition of some of analytic philosophy's most technical achievements will persuade the persuadable that philosophers really have something to be expert about and that, with an able guide and a bit of intellectual effort, thoughtful people can profit from their work. McGinn himself makes humbler claims for his book, the fruit of thirty-

eight years of teaching philosophy of language. He writes that students tend to have enormous difficulty understanding its foundational texts. He will therefore explain these texts, assuming no previous familiarity. He hopes his efforts will be useful not just to students but to their professors, saving the latter "arduous exegesis." Ten texts are explained, though they are not reproduced here; the book is meant to accompany a standard anthology.

The texts, beginning with Gottlob Frege's 1892 article "On Sense and Reference," are classics indeed, meaning that anyone wishing to know modern philosophy of language must have mastered them. And they are undeniably difficult. McGinn's painstaking efforts at unpacking them will surely be, as he hopes, a boon in the classroom. But McGinn is too modest in his aims. I would offer *Philosophy of Language* as a challenge both to those who think that there is no such thing as philosophical expertise and to those who think there ought not to be. Both biases are refuted by what has been accomplished in the years since Frege's article first set philosophy of language on its modern track.

What exactly is this modern track? What, to be more blunt, is philosophy of language trying to accomplish? McGinn addresses this blunt question bluntly:

The most general thing we can say is that philosophy of language is concerned with the general nature of meaning. But this is not very helpful to the novice, so let us be more specific. Language is about the world—we use it to communicate about things. So we must ask what this "aboutness" is: what is it and how does it work? That is, how does language manage to hook up with reality? How do we refer to things, and is referring to things all that language does? Further, is referring determined by what is in the mind of the referer? If not, what else might determine reference? Some parts of language we call "names," but is everything in language a name? How is a word referring to a person referring to something? Do expressions like "Tom Jones," "the father of Shakespeare," and "that dog" all refer in the same way?

In what way do these types of expressions differ in meaning? How is a sentence related to its meaning? Is the meaning the same as the sentence or is it something more abstract? Can't different sentences express the same meaning? What is a meaning? Are meanings things at all? How is meaning related to truth? Whether what we say is true depends on what we mean, so is meaning deeply connected to

truth? How are we to understand the concept of truth? What is the relationship between what a sentence means and what a person means in uttering a sentence?"

In addition to Frege, McGinn devotes a chapter each to Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*, Bertrand Russell's "Descriptions," Keith Donnellan's "Reference and Definite Descriptions," David Kaplan's "Demonstratives," Gareth Evans's "Understanding Demonstratives," Hilary Putnam's "Meaning

Frege is even attempted, and it gestures toward a truth that is fundamental to analytic philosophy. Clarity and complexity are not antagonists, but rather allies. The pursuit of clarity churns up unexpected complexity, but it can be tamed by the pursuit of further clarity.

Many other classics in the philosophy of language have been omitted, including writing by Ludwig Wittgenstein, Peter Strawson, Michael Dummett, Willard van Ormand Quine, John Austin, Jerry Fodor, and John Searle. Also missing is the work of Noam Chomsky, a linguist whose insights into the mathematical structure of language have had a tremendous impact on the philosophy of language. The intended use for this book has shaped its scope.

*Philosophy of Language* is fitted to the duration of a college semester, but McGinn's sculpted choice of ten works also forms a narrative arc, allowing the reader to see the cumulative progress of the field. The theories build upon one another in the way that scientific theories do, with the results of one text leading to the ideas of the next. McGinn is very clear in explaining, for example, exactly how Donald Davidson appropriated the insights of Alfred Tarski's semantic theory of truth for formal languages (the rule-governed systems constructed by logicians to state and prove theorems in logic and mathematics) and adapted them for use in a theory of meaning for natural languages (the languages we actually speak, like Urdu and Spanish, which are richer and wilder than the formal language of the logicians).

Philosophical progress is perhaps less accurately measured in the discovery of answers and more in the discovery of questions, which often includes the discovery of the largeness lurking within seemingly small questions. The theories explained by McGinn reveal many prosaic linguistic situations to be perplexingly fascinating.

If, for example, I assert, "The prime minister of the US is six feet tall," have I said something false, in which case are you to infer that the prime minister of the US is not six feet tall, or have I managed to make no statement at all? Or if, standing at a bar, I remark to my companion, "The man drinking a martini is a famous philosopher," and it turns out that it is only water in the martini glass, have I managed nevertheless to say something true, if in fact the teetotaler is a famous philosopher? If, when asked to write a letter of recommendation for a student applying for graduate work, I write a letter that speaks exclusively of her excellent handwriting, how have I damned her chances for acceptance, since there is nothing in what I've written that says she is not competent for graduate work?

Such questions, removed from their theoretical contexts, may seem too pal-



Bertrand Russell, 1962; photograph by Marc Riboud

and Reference," Alfred Tarski's "The Semantic Conception of Truth," Donald Davidson's "Semantics for Natural Languages," and H. P. Grice's "Meaning." These texts thrust the reader into the core of philosophy of language: theories of reference, of meaning, of truth. They develop a specialized vocabulary to do justice to subtle but indispensable distinctions, starting with the distinction between a sentence, a proposition, and a statement:

A sentence is a collection of shapes, signs, or acoustic signals. Different shapes of letters on paper or acoustic signals in the air can correspond to the same proposition. Propositions, then, are very different from sentences—more abstract than physical. A sentence is the perceptible vehicle that expresses a proposition, and in addition can be uttered by a person. When you utter a sentence like "Snow is white," you thereby make a statement. A statement is a relationship between three things: the speaker, the sentence, and the proposition.

This standard act of conceptual analysis occurs on the second page of the book, before the discussion of