Wittgenstein *versus* Mauthner:
Two critiques of language, two mysticisms

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One of the paths pursued by the philosophy that interlinks the 19th and 20th centuries is the critique of language (*Sprachkritik*), which was cultivated intensively in *fin-de-siècle* Central Europe. Its various programmes coincided in questioning the expressive possibilities of words and ended up pointing to a paradoxical alternative in silence.

The present paper seeks to illustrate the impact of this tradition on Wittgenstein's early philosophy by analysing his reception of Mauthner's work. Mauthner devoted himself to denying the epistemological competence of words in his monumental study *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*. In this and other texts – such as his outstanding dictionary of philosophy, *Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, subtitled *Neue Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* – he developed a critique of language which had devastatingly sceptical conclusions. Against them, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* explicitly took up its position.

This paper is developed in two parts. The first part analyses Mauthner's proposal, which, incidentally, will give us an opportunity to verify its strong Nietzschean accent. The second part is devoted to Wittgenstein's counterproposal, which, in the *Tractatus*, also peered into the abyss of silence, though with a different motivation from that of the *Beiträge*.

1. Mauthner's *Sprachkritik*.

Largely coinciding with the results achieved by Nietzsche in *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne*, but nearly three decades later, Mauthner insisted in his *Beiträge* on the cooperation of imagination in the formation of language. It was, he concluded in an example, "a poetic genius who in primitive times was able to fix his isolated ideas of fir trees, oaks, etc., in the sound sign 'tree'" (Mauthner, 1901–1902). Words thus show an irreducible conventional character that also contains an arbitrary operation of abstraction. Being constituted and functioning as concepts, our terms do indeed avoid particular cases and singular differences in favour of a kind of archetype.

Thus language sanctions universal meanings, ideas whose validity seems to be due to a cause, to something real. In fact, it lends its protection to a metaphysics given over to which Mauthner attaches the label of "superstition" or "word fetishism" (Mauthner, 1901–1902). For the fact is that our vocabulary gives an illusion of a supernatural, ideal world.

Words and the logic that orders them ultimately sustain a web of fiction – a "mythology" (Mauthner, 1901–1902) – which is managed by a specific interpretation of reality. The key to it is the rudimentary voluntarism and animism with which the human being faces the world in order to make it intelligible. Consequently, his creation is irremediably anthropomorphic – "hoministic", Mauthner says (Mauthner, 1901–1902).

The fact is that for this great hermeneutic operation that words perform in the service of the precarious human condition there is a corresponding theory of knowledge ready to renounce the essence of things. Nietzsche did so

enthusiastically, redefining truth in literary terms as a "mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms" (Nietzsche, *KSA* 1, 880). Mauthner drives the idea home by pointing out that with our senses, which are strictly "accidental", we can never get "beyond a metaphorical description of the world" (Mauthner, 1910, vol. 1, p. 12).

Consequently, in an exercise of "nihilistic scepticism" Mauther ends up by condemning language as a "useless device for knowledge". Our dictionary, therefore, cannot have any scientific utility, though it can have a "high artistic value". And, as an artistic medium, words promise to give voice to idiosyncrasy and express personal experiences. In this regard Mauthner recognizes the moral quality of the poet, who is someone "whose individual language is richer, stronger or deeper than common language" (Mauthner, 1901–1902). This is so because, with a voice of his own, a different voice, he knows how to exploit the connotations and evocations contained by the metaphors of our vocabulary.

However, the subject's original, creative playing with words, despite being the part of language that is "most valuable for the personality", reveals itself to be of little significance socially, "the most worthless in the stock market of human intercourse", to the extent that –according to the *Beiträge* – it proves to be "untransferable, incomprehensible, unsharable". This difficulty of divulging the individual's viewpoint is due to the fact that language corresponds more to general than to particular expectations.

Indeed, both for Nietzsche and for Mauthner, our expressive resources are a corollary of life in community. For Nietzsche, their development corresponds to the human being's need to communicate with his peers in order to shield his own weakness and ward off the possibility of a generalized excess of violence. Language –as paragraph 354 of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* notes – originates in order to overcome distances and unify criteria, to act as a "bridge" between human beings (Nietzsche, *KSA* 3, 529). Therefore it is a "useful invention", as Mauthner also describes it, an anthropological resource that ministers to human survival (Mauthner, 1901–1902).

The *Beiträge* confirm the social use of language and its levelling action, adducing that "it has never gone beyond the convention of herd actions". Therefore, Mauthner concludes, it serves as a collective memory and acts as an instrument of tradition, exercising an impersonal coercion on individual thinking: "what thinks in us is language". Words are made not to express the exceptional destiny of each individual but to manage the small needs of all.

In view of this analysis, it seems that the measure of linguistic creativity is gregariousness and that, as a result, the expression of authenticity is condemned to the most intimate of monologues. Therefore Mauthner contemplates the possibility of silence, the "magnificence of silence" as he says, with the support of the teachings of Meister Eckhart. In his *Wörterbuch der Philosophie* he reconstructs the history of the term "*Mystik*", closing with a proposal of "sceptical nominalist mysticism", which, in keeping with the *enlightenment* of language undertaken in the *Beiträge*, discards the encounter with the divine (Mauthner, 1910,

vol. 2, pp. 362 ff.). Consequently, it is a "godless mysticism" (*gottlose Mystik*) – as he describes it in *Der Atheismus und seine Geschichte im Abendlande* – which designates the difficult exercise of thinking outside the fetishistic herd metaphysics of words.

As a result of this approach, Mauthner induces language to a suicide that is mentioned in the following passage from the *Beiträge*:

> "Men learned to speak in order to understand one another. Cultural languages have lost the ability to help men to advance beyond the most rudimentary level and attain understanding. It seems that the time has come to learn to be silent once again".

And Mauthner's time is also Wittgenstein's time. In *fin-de-siècle* Europe they shared the same concern for language. In fact, in proposition 4.0031 of the *Tractatus* we can read that "All philosophy is a 'critique of language' (*Sprachkritik*)", with a parenthesis that specifies "though not in Mauthner's sense" (Wittgenstein, 1971). Yet it is actually Mauthner who, in defining his philosophical project, provides an image of transition:

> "I must do away with the language that is behind me, beside me and before me; step by step, therefore, I must tread on and destroy each rung in the ladder" (Mauthner, 1901–1902).

This metaphor certainly helps us to link up with Wittgenstein, because he too looks into silence from the ladder that he sets up a few years later – in 1918 – against the penultimate proposition of the *Tractatus*, which reveals the paradoxical status of his critique of language. He says, as you will recall:

> "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)" (Wittgenstein, 1971, §6.54).

2. Wittgenstein's reply to Mauthner.

Thus, for Wittgenstein, philosophy presents itself as a propaedeutic path, the real teachings of which are waiting at the end. And the conclusion of the *Tractatus* is, quite simply, that "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein, 1971, §7). It is a question, therefore, of drawing a precise boundary between language and silence, scrupulously respecting their respective domains, which are those of *saying* and *showing*, those of the clearly *expressible* and the irremediably *inexpressible*. And so the "Preface" of the *Tractatus* sums up the sense of the book by indicating that "what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence".

For Wittgenstein, unlike Mauthner, does consider that words are competent to represent reality – although, as we shall see, that is precisely where their poverty lies. The fact is that the scepticism that provides an essential unity to the *Beiträge* is flung, in the pages of the *Tractatus*, against the mathematical certainty of the propositional calculus that its author had learnt with Russell. Thus it seems possible to base language on a logic immune to all psychologism and any historical or anthropological consideration.

Indeed, the logic that is valid for Wittgenstein is not, like the one that Mauthner criticizes, a useful invention, but the faithful translation of the structure of thought, and

therefore not an empirical matter but a transcendent one. Logic is the condition of possibility of any scientific description of the world: "The truth is that we could not *say* what an 'illogical' world would look like" (Wittgenstein, 1971, §3.031). Thus, on the basis of their isomorphism, propositions and events share with thinking one and the same logic, which can be defined with a highly expressive metaphor: "the great mirror" (Wittgenstein, 1971, §5.511).

But it is precisely this epistemological competence of language, its suitability for science, that seems to disappoint Wittgenstein. "We feel", he writes in the *Tractatus*, "that even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched" (Wittgenstein, 1971, §6.52). And the fact is that language is of no use for tackling those problems. In his *Lecture on Ethics* Wittgenstein explains this by saying that words are like "vessels" with a capacity only for expressing facts: "as a teacup", he says, "will only hold a teacup full of water and if I were to pour out a gallon over it" (Wittgenstein, 1965). And the logic of the *Tractatus* can, indeed, only grasp an atomized, quantitative reality in which facts are equally insignificant.

Outside any context, impermeable to the nuances of interpretation, the world that can be said is, therefore, a monotonous, fortuitous scene, given over to solipsism. For the self – my self – is presented as its necessary condition, at the cost of shrinking "to a point without extension" which is coordinated with those very things. At the limit of facts, this subject is the master of a private but desolate space in which "God does not reveal himself" (Wittgesntein, 1971, §6.432). In short, it is a world without opportunities for the unconditioned, incapable of accommodating what has value. Wittgenstein writes:

> „In the world everything is as it is, and happens as it does happen: in it no value exists" (Wittgenstein, 1971, §6.41).

This *extra-worldliness* of value is at the far side of words and requires one to edge from there along the boundary of language so as not to knock into it, for "This running against the walls of our cage", Wittgenstein says metaphorically in his *Lecture on Ethics*, "is perfectly, absolutely hopeless".

It seems that for Wittgenstein, too, the time has come for silence. In fact, in a famous letter to Ludwig von Ficker he explains that the *Tractatus* consists of two parts, "the one which is here" and "everything I have not written", emphasizing that it is precisely the latter that is important. Yet proposition 6.522 ot the *Tractatus* points out that "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words", assigning the domain of the mystical to them. What prevails here is a view of the world *sub specie aeterni* –foreign to factic atomism – which covers the questions connected with the meaning of existence (Wittgenstein, 1971, §6.45). This concerns ethics and aesthetics – and also religion – and, far from calling for a discursive development, they are quietly resolved on the basis of intuition and feeling. Thus they show themselves, they only show themselves, without even admitting doubts or clarifications. In this regard, Wittgenstein indicates in proposition 6.521 that "The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem", going on to wonder, in parentheses:

> "Is not this the reason why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have then been unable to say what constituted that sense?"

This firm renunciation of the word by Wittgenstein when it comes to tackling extra-scientific matters offers a pretext for reconsidering the comparison with Mauthner and, above all, for establishing a definitive difference between the two authors.

As we have seen, Mauthner's silence was sceptical. Declining all transcendence and any longing for totality, it gave content to an *atheistic* mysticism devoted to a worldly individual who had to be on guard against superstitions and ideals, someone whom we might sum up in this context as an *enlightened* subject. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, formulates his mysticism in an undogmatic but religious tone, shoring it up with terms such as "God", "grace" and "spirit", which are strewn throughout the *Tractatus* and saturate the *Geheime Tagebücher*. What is shown in this way is the desire to reconnect the individual to a higher, transcendent, extra-worldly meaning. And this inclination fits in with the fact that Wittgenstein's mysticism decides – as we read in his *Notebooks*, in the entry for 11 June 1916 – that "The meaning of life, that is, the meaning of the world, we can call God."

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