Science and the Art of Language Maintenance

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1. Classical vs. romantic understanding

In one of many reflections about John, who with his wife Sylvia join the I character and his son Chris for the first half of a motorcycle trip from the Midwest to Montana, the I character comments, "He [John] isn't so interested in what things *mean* as in what they *are*." (p. 59). Here Pirsig's I character intimates a distinction between 'classical' and the 'romantic' modes of seeing the world. The classical mode is to see what things 'mean', their underlying form/structure. The romantic mode is to see the immediate surface/appearance of things, what they 'are'. When the I character suggests using part of an aluminum can to 'shim' John's handlebars so they stop slipping, John is doubtful. John sees an old aluminum can and is seemingly distressed by using something so base to fix his precision piece of German engineering (a BMW). He sees the surface, what it is. The I character sees beyond the surface to the properties of aluminum, how well they fit the particular demands of a shim (soft, non-rusting), and the appropriate thickness of the can's aluminum. (p.61) The problem, Pirsig's I character concludes, is conflicting "*visions of reality*".

> "What you've got here, really, are *two* realities, one of immediate artistic appearance and one of underlying scientific explanation, and they don't match and they don't fit and they don't really have much of anything to do with one another." (p.63)

Both modes of understanding have faults. The I character notes that John romantically misunderstands what motorcycle maintenance entails. John thinks maintenance is working with hard steel *parts* in an array of shapes and sizes. The I character sees *ideas* and a working on concepts. (p. 102) In short, "That's all a motorcycle is, a system of concepts worked out in steel. There's no part in it, no shape in it, that is not out of someone's mind […]." (p. 104) That said for the classical view, it has its own share of problems. The first is that understanding e.g. a motorcycle from this view presupposes already knowing how it works (the underlying system of concepts). Another difficulty is the absence of an observer, a subject, someone who rides, appreciates or tells stories about the cycle. A third limitation is that it only deals with facts, absent are value judgments of 'good' and/or 'bad'. And, a final objection, perhaps the most important in relation to classical understanding's own claims, is its cutting edge, what he calls its "intellectual scalpel: "You get the illusion that all those parts are just there and are being named as they exist. But they can be named quite differently and organized quite differently depending on how the knife moves." (p. 80) And here Pirsig is on to something, how do we decide when and in what direction to cut?

2. Polanyi's scientific intuition and belief

Deciding which direction to cut is a question Michael Polanyi was interested in exploring. In *Science, Faith and Society*, he uses the analogy of a burglar in the night. If in the middle of the night we hear a noise, a thumping about, in a neighbouring room we know to be unoccupied, we search for an explanation. Is the family cat going after something dangling just out of reach? Has an unlatched window been caught by the wind? Polanyi writes, "We try to guess. Was that a footfall? That means a burglar!". (p. 23) Presented with an array of 'facts' we swing the blade of our intellect in one direction instead of another. Just as a motorcycle can be classified according to different schemes (making a 'part' difficult to order because different motorcycle manufacturers have different motorcycle mereologies), for Polanyi,

> "scientific propositions do not refer definitely to any observable facts but are like statements about the presence of a burglar next door—describing something real which may manifest itself in many indefinite ways." (p. 29)

Although it shows a less demanding level of certainty than one might expect, the burglar scenario does show "a consistent effort at guessing". (p. 23)

One source for this consistency Polanyi terms "scientific intuition", a kind of 'Gestalt' we have for perceiving contours, arising from an underlying "urge to make contact with a reality which is felt to be there already to start with". (p. 35) Another source he offers is found in our practices, systems of belief and their embeddedness in language. Here Polanyi draws from the work of social anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard on the Zande tribe of Southern Sudan. When conflicts arise amongst the Zande they consult a poison oracle, which consists in administering a substance, Benge, to a foul. Both the way in which *Benge* is collected and the address given when it is administered are elements crucial to its proper functioning as an oracle-poison and it is to these the Zande turn for explanation when discrepancies in the oracle's answers arise, rather than to the matter-of-fact poisonness of the *Benge* itself as a European might. For Polanyi, Zande witchcraft exemplifies the power a system of belief has in determining the outcome of the oracle-poison and further, "the power of language to embody and firmly to uphold a system of not explicitly asserted beliefs". (Polanyi 1952) Here Polanyi concludes:

> "So long as we use a certain language, all questions that we can ask will have to be formulated in it and will thereby confirm the theory of the universe which is implied in the vocabulary and structure of the language." (Polanyi 1952)

Thus for Polanyi, scientific intuition and the system of belief embedded in language are decisive for determining which way our intellectual scalpel cuts.

3. E.M. Forester on anonymity

Forester writes that "words have two functions to perform: they give information or they create an atmosphere."(p.77) His arch example of information is a sign reading "Stop" on a tramline. This is an example of pure information. If the tram stops, the sign is correct, if it does not, the sign is incorrect. A sign in a marketplace reading "Beware of pickpockets, male and female.", however, conjures up Dickensonian images of children having their sweets money stolen, old men being hustled and women unawares having patches deftly snipped from the backs of their fur coats. It produces in us a feeling of foreboding and reminds us of any number of things such as the insecurity and fragility of

human life, the violent condition of the poor vs. the obliviousness of the rich, etc., i.e. an atmosphere in addition to the information it conveys. Although the beware pickpockets sign is not great literature, for Forester the atmosphere it creates is the realm of great literature. Although great literature may contain information, e.g. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* about motorcycles, it is insufficient to be successfully applied by us to actually repair a motorcycle (Pirsig even says so in his author's note). So what is atmosphere and how do we gauge its usefulness? Atmosphere stems not from something conveyed through particular words, but in their arrangement, their style. In this lies their power to elicit dread, mirth and calm, possibly even simultaneously. The realm of atmosphere is one that "answers to its own laws, supports itself, internally coheres, and has a new standard of truth."(p. 81) The truth of information is its accuracy, the truth of a poem whether it "hangs together". (p. 81) "Information points to something else. A poem points to nothing but itself. Information is relative. A poem is absolute." (p.81)

Just as words have two functions, for Forster "each human mind has two personalities, one on the surface, one deeper down". (p. 82) The surface personality "has a name" such as Robert Pirsig. It is this personality that lives in the world, has idiosyncratic habits, relationships, trials and tribulations of the everyday variety. The other, is trickier to pin down, for it has no name and its depths are a ground spring running through the deep personalities of the Pirsigs and Dickenses of this world. It is something general to all humans and inspires works general and accessible to all and often across time. And in this lies the anonymity of great literature: "The poet wrote the poem, no doubt, but he forgot himself while he wrote it, and we forget him while we read." (p. 83). For Forster a signature belongs to the world of information, to the surface personality. The anonymity of great literature belongs to the realm of atmosphere, to deep personality.

4. Wittgenstein, the Life of Words and the Literariness of Language

In the end, the sanity of Pirsig's I character follows suite with the ghost of his previous self. Although Wittgenstein does not write much about insanity, some well know phrases from *Philosophical Investigations* about searching for hidden essences can be taken as a case in point, such as being on slippery ice with no friction (§107) in relation to the sublimity of logic and reaching a point when one's spade is turned (§217) in relation to the regress of rule-following. When Phaedrus continued digging even after his spade reached bedrock, he lost friction with reality and went spinning away from instead of toward it. Both Pirsig's I character, Polanyi and Forster each in their own fashion partake of this error of classical understandings 'depth' thinking, that meaning itself or its generation are something that come from inside of us: the I character for holding that the motorcycle is 'a system of concepts' that 'is primarily a mental phenomenon', the underlying gestalt urge of Polanyi's scientific intuition, and Forester's depth personality as the source of literary anonymity. However, they each offer something I think not only in line with Wittgenstein's linguistic turn on rationality but can help to illustrate it.

If we are to carry a lesson regarding language and reality from Pirsig's novel, a hands-on metaphor of 'tinkering' is where the I character successfully overcame the classical/romantic split he saw in understanding. Yet on the scale of language as a whole, tinkering has its

limits. When confronted with Zande witchcraft, no slight adjustment or honing of their intellectual scalpel will lead westerners to accept the judgment of the poison oracle. It will simply not cut that way due to its mode of fabrication. We would need a different scalpel or an altogether different instrument to be at one with the Zande's conceptions of the world. But does this not imply that we can neither redirect nor expand our rationality?

This is where Forster's information – atmosphere continuum and connecting anonymity to atmosphere are illustrative. I hope the reader can agree that language conveys information and atmosphere. Wittgenstein's arguments against private language are in part a defense of it also requiring anonymity. Yet we saw above that an objection to classical understanding was the lack of a subject. Forster's solution was an internal 'ur' subject running through us all which finds its expression in atmosphere. For Wittgenstein the kind of anonymity we find in language comes neither through a depth personality, nor a special place where words live in the mind. Even though Virginia Woolf in her essay "Craftsmanship" claims the later, she also writes the following which I think approaches Wittgenstein's view:

> "Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations–naturally. They have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing them today—that they are so stored with meanings, with memories, that they have contracted so many famous marriages." (p. 131)

Earlier in this essay Woolf writes regarding the 'usefulness' of words. Making a word useful is to give it a single meaning. Forcing words to be useful is a problem. Doing so causes them to mislead us since "it is their nature not to express one simple statement but a thousand possibilities." (p. 127) Put another way, language at the pure information end of Forster's continuum conveys neither accurate nor inaccurate information since it is stripped of the use generated atmosphere against which accuracy could be determined; even a tram "Stop." sign has atmosphere.

The linguistic turn of Wittgenstein's redirection of rationality is akin to Forster's atmosphere and Woolf's depiction of the life of words. Pirsig's I character makes the mistake of attributing this multifarious character of words to a mental instrument unlimited in the directions it can cut. It is rather the case that we can divide things up differently because words, our concepts, do not have single meanings. Philosophy which carves concepts intellectually or claims they can or should have such single meanings goes wrong. Yes, we must know the system, only that the system we need to know to 'tinker' in language, as Polyani recognized, is neither explicit nor explicable hierarchically, we must live it. Concepts are anonymous, but not in the logical or scientific fashion of generality/universality. Meaning is on the surface but, although it sounds strange, deeply there, i.e. over time. Although this kind of meaning is anonymous, it is not stripped of the subject like classical understanding, and therefore, not of value judgments. Subjects are vehicles for the reproduction of language and in their use of words and phrases tinker with and fine tune it. Although we can use language like the poet, forgetting ourselves, and the listener hear our words as general not subjective statements, we are not being poetic, we are simply using words conventionally. But the convention came from somewhere and this is where the subject and their idiosyncratic position in the world can make a lasting contribution.

The thoughts in this paper are born of discussions this spring with Ralph Jewell, Helle Nyvold and Christian Erbacher on Wittgenstein and literature; the notion of 'tinkering' comes from Jewell's reading of Pirsig.

Literature

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