

Chapter 1

Rush Rhees: The Reality of Discourse

DAVID COCKBURN

1. Of the work published in his lifetime, the most widely known, and influential, of Rush Rhees's writings are the papers 'Can there be a private language?' and 'Wittgenstein's Builders'. These appeared initially in the 1950s in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* and were later reprinted in his collection *Discussions of Wittgenstein* (1970). One other collection of writings, *Without Answers* (1969), was published during his lifetime. Since his death seven volumes of his writings have appeared under the editorship of D. Z. Phillips: *On Religion and Philosophy* (1997), *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse* (1998), *Moral Questions* (1998), *Discussions of Simone Weil* (1998), *Wittgenstein's 'On Certainty'* (2003), *In Dialogue with the Greeks Volume I: The Presocratics and Reality* (2004), and *In Dialogue with the Greeks Volume II: Plato and Dialectic* (2004). This essay will concentrate on the second of these volumes, which is an extended development of the themes of the two *Aristotelian Society* papers. In the final section I will say a little about the place that his concern with *discourse* has within his general understanding of the character of philosophy.

2. Rhees writes: 'Philosophy is concerned with the intelligibility of language, or the possibility of understanding. And in that way it is concerned with the possibility of discourse'.¹ It is, I think, important to be clear what Rhees does *not* mean by this. His suggestion is *not* that philosophy is concerned with 'the conditions of the possibility of discourse'.² We are tempted to think that one of the aims of philosophy is to investigate something – the nature of language perhaps – on which our speaking with each other depends. Many philosophers have seen their central task in that way; and many – perhaps including Rhees – have taken this to be one of Wittgenstein's concerns. Rhees's opposition to this view of philosophy is seen in remarks such as the following: 'The language – what you understand when you understand the language – is not something apart from understanding people and speaking with them. Something which makes that possible' (*WPD*, p. 277). Sharing a language with another is not what makes

discussion between us possible. Sharing a language with another is nothing other than being able to speak with her.³

Wittgenstein's 'rule following considerations' are often read as an exploration of a condition on which the possibility of discourse depends; and it is, perhaps, difficult to see how to avoid reading some of the remarks in which that discussion culminates in this way. For example: 'If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgements'.⁴ Whether there is a reading of this remark such that it says something true, Rhees would, I think, insist that there are readings on which it contains a serious confusion. The confusion lies in the suggestion that an 'agreement in judgement' is a condition on which the possibility of speaking with each other depends. This point deserves some development.

'You cannot say that it is because they have a common life that they are able to engage in conversation' (*WPD*, p. 155). You cannot say this, I take it, because their 'common life' is not something independent of the fact that they are able to engage in conversation.⁵ And we face the same problem if it is suggested that the agreement in judgement, or in our use of words – the agreement, for example, in our use of the words 'pain', 'chair' or 'blasphemy' – is a condition of our being able to speak to each other with understanding. For if we take seriously the idea that in speaking of an individual's *use* of a word we are speaking of particular utterances, in particular contexts, into which it enters we will not suppose that we can characterize *my* use of a word independently of the ways in which the word enters into my linguistic exchanges with others. I respond to your 'Can we move him now?' with 'He's still in dreadful pain'; to your 'Where is he going to sit?' with 'There are more chairs next door'; and so on. A characterization of me as using a certain word in a particular way will make reference to my conversations with others into which the word enters. To speak of how I use the word 'pain' you must speak of the fact that I respond in certain ways – such as the above – to particular questions that others ask me; that I tell you that there is someone next door in pain who needs help; that I enter into discussions about whether the pain in my foot is more severe than the one in yours, or about whether a third person's pain in the elbow is really a cause for serious concern; and so on. We must not, then, picture each of us, individually, using our words as we do, and then, as a result of a harmony in these uses, being able to talk together.⁶

I said that we are tempted to think that one of the aims of philosophy is to investigate something – the nature of language perhaps – on which our speaking with each other depends. Wittgenstein is, I take it, struggling to free us of this temptation when he writes: ‘We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm’.⁷ We might articulate Wittgenstein’s point by saying that what we are concerned with in philosophy is the ways in which we *use* words: not something that lies behind and guides that use. And we might take his analogy between words and tools to be a helpful way to bring that point home. This may go with the idea – it has for many – that the task of philosophy is to characterize, to provide a perspicuous representation of, our use of different words; and perhaps, in doing that, to highlight differences in the uses of particular words whose similarities up to a certain point have misled us.

Rhees expresses serious reservations about the analogy between words and tools; and, connected with that, reservations about talk of our ‘using’ words or language.⁸ His reservations focus on the idea of ‘function’: a tendency he finds in Wittgenstein to suppose that the place of a word in our lives is helpfully thought of in terms of some end that it serves. While one might have doubts about how fair it is to read Wittgenstein as supposing that the analogy should be developed in *this* direction – how far his talk of the ‘use’ of a word should be read through the idea of ‘function’ – there is room for a suspicion that the analogy plays a crucial, and dangerous, role in ways in which we may be tempted to take his talk of ‘use’. We might express the point like this. Ways in which we may think of the ‘use’ of a word – especially to the extent that our thinking is guided by the analogy with tools – may encourage us to think of a crucial shift in our conception of the task of philosophy as being of this form: we are to move from the idea that our task is to investigate a structure *behind* our lives with words to the idea that our task is to investigate a structure *in* our lives with words. I will try to indicate why I speak of this as a ‘danger’.

Suppose that we think of a description of the ‘use’ of a word as being something of the form of a general statement of the particular assertions into which that word enters – or, as we might say, *can* enter – in particular circumstances. If we are picturing matters in this way we should, I think, find ourselves at this point very unclear about what is to be included in

‘use’. The unclarity may have a variety of dimensions. One is this. We should be unclear about *which* features of particular utterances of a word are to be counted as aspects of ‘use’ in the sense relevant to meaning. For one thing, there may, I take it, be all kinds of pattern in my, or our, utterances of a particular word that are unambiguously quite irrelevant to the word’s meaning. The interesting cases, however, are those in which we have differences that seem to be of a *form* that are relevant to questions about the meaning of our words. Imagine, for example, that, in some contrast with you, it is extremely difficult to bring me to acknowledge that a tramp⁹ is, or may be, in serious pain: difficult, let us suppose, because it is difficult to bring me to let the tramp into my attention or conversation at all. With this, we can imagine that to the extent that I am, in a particular case, brought to agree that, as I express it, ‘This man [this tramp] is in serious pain’ I do not weigh his pain as you do as a reason for action or feeling: I do not, that is, respond to him as you do, and I do not offer or accept ‘He is in serious pain’ as a reason, say, for helping him as you do; I would, for example, find ridiculous your suggestion that we miss our dinner appointment in order to help him. Now I take it that it is to be expected that minor differences of roughly this form should be a pervasive feature of our lives: differences, in the case of sensations and emotions, in how we ‘read’ another’s facial and other expressions, and differences in how we weigh their feelings as reasons for attending to them in particular ways. In these examples we have, in *some*, not wholly irrelevant sense, differences in the use of the word ‘pain’. Are we to say, on that account, that these people mean something different – if only very slightly – by the word ‘pain’?

I suspect that Wittgenstein’s analogy between words and tools may stand in the way of our feeling the force, or recognizing the significance, of these questions. People do all kinds of things with hammers: besides bashing in nails, they use them as paperweights, to prop open windows, and so on. This does not, however, threaten the sense of talk of the ‘use’ of a hammer. The reason it does not is that hammers are produced by human beings with the aim that they should serve a certain end. It is this that dictates which hammer wielding performances, and which aspects of them, are features of a hammer’s ‘use’. Now the word ‘red’, or ‘untidy’, is not, in any remotely analogous way, a human product defined in terms of the end that it serves. To the extent that that is so (and there will be disputes, disputes that are central to Rhees’s concerns, about how far it *is* so), one should lose one’s sense that the analogy with the use of a tool may illuminate the sense in

which there is a structure in our use of a word that it is the task of philosophy to describe. There is, perhaps, much less of a structure in our life with words than the analogy with tools might lead us to suppose.

I will jump here to a summary statement of a conclusion that is, perhaps, suggested, though hardly established, by what I have just said. A philosopher who wishes to describe our ‘use’ of a particular word, if he is not engaged in the chimerical task of saying everything that might be said about every occasion on which that word has been uttered, will be involved in making distinctions between what is significant in our use of the word and what is not¹⁰; and, what is not quite the same, between those variations in ‘use’ with which we can live comfortably and those of which this is not so. The making of such distinctions will involve judgement – nothing in what there is to be observed in our use of the word will dictate how they are to be made – and will sometimes be such that we cannot assume automatic agreement from all who will attend clearly to the facts. In making such distinctions, the philosopher will commit himself to claims about how the word *is* to be used.

I asked: Are we to say, on account of the differences in our use of the word ‘pain’, that people mean something different – if only very slightly – by the word? We may be tempted to reply that the answer is obviously ‘No’ on grounds of the following form: the fact that we *would* run into difficulties were we talking about a tramp is clearly quite irrelevant to our discussion now about John; and so clearly provides no basis for the suggestion that we mean something different when we speak of John’s ‘pain’. If, however, we defend a negative answer in *that* way it is quite unclear what can be left of the connection, which we thought we had learned from Wittgenstein, between meaning and use; for was not the crucial point – or at least *a* crucial point – the idea that what I am doing now in saying something only has the character that it does in virtue of what others say on other occasions?

Are we to say, on account of the differences in our use of the word ‘pain’, that people mean something different – if only very slightly – by the word? I suspect that that is, at this point, an unhelpful question. In any case, I want, for a moment, to forget about ‘meaning’,¹¹ and to focus simply on ‘use’; focus, that is, on the question: what is the relevance of what is said on other occasions to our characterization of what I am doing now as *saying* something – and as saying this particular thing?

3. ‘Philosophy is concerned with what you learn when you learn the language, or when you learn to speak’ (*WPD*, p. 276). Philosophy is an attempt to get clear, not about a condition on which discourse depends, but about *what* you learn when you learn to speak: what it is that makes it correct to say that these people are *speaking*. The attempt to get clear about this is, Rhees suggests, closely linked with a concern about scepticism – a scepticism that Rhees takes to be central to philosophy – about whether, in learning to speak, we learn *anything*: a scepticism about, as Rhees expresses it, ‘the reality of discourse’, or, as he also puts it, about ‘Whether it makes any difference what you say – whether there is any point in it anyway; whether there is any point in saying anything anyway’ (*WPD*, p. 277).

How are we to picture this sceptical concern: the concern about ‘the reality of discourse’? If, in one way or another, we think of language as a tool, it may be very unclear what this could come to. There is little, if any, room for that concern in cases in which the words function, more or less, as simply tools in a practical venture.¹² There are contexts in which we might say: so long as the results are achieved – for example, I get my cup of coffee – there is no further question about whether there has been successful communication between the waitress and myself. But much discussion is not like that.¹³ When in conversation with another, one may, in particular cases, wonder whether one is really in contact with them at all: whether the words that are passing back and forth really amount to a genuine discussion, or whether it is all just words. I sense, perhaps, that while the moves that each of us makes in the conversation seem fine on the surface, nothing is really going on; or I worry that your understanding of what I am saying (and mine of what you are saying) may be quite different from what the other takes it to be.

This kind of worry may lead me, in my more philosophical moments, to think of meaning and understanding as processes that lie beneath the surface of our words; and so may, in *that* way, be a seed from which a general scepticism about meaning may grow. But we can be concerned about ‘the reality of discourse’ – or, at least, about the reality of this particular discussion – without being in the grip of such images. The concern, we might say, is a concern about how, if at all, what we are saying now fits into your life: ‘What did you learn from the dialogue or conversation you have just

had? Has it made any difference to the way you understand things? Do you see things at all differently? Or was the whole conversation just one more thing to add to the disconnected jumble?’ (*WPD*, p. 29). Will her endorsement of what I have just said – for example, of my words ‘John is not really to blame for what has happened’ – be reflected in her life in ways that I take for granted? Will it, for example, be reflected in her attitude towards, and treatment of, John? The connections, or lack of them, between what is going on here, in this conversation, and what goes on at other points in our lives include, centrally, connections with what happens in other conversations. Just as she is, in some measure, not really engaged in conversation with me if her immediate response to what I say indicates a failure to take in, or see fully the force of, what I have said, so ‘the whole conversation [was] just one more thing to add to the disconnected jumble’ of our lives if, for example, having endorsed my words she goes on, in later conversations, to speak as if the earlier discussion had never taken place. The thought that this was a real discussion goes with my counting on her standing by what she said, resting on what she said then in my interpretation of something she says later, appealing to our agreement on *that* point in defending my proposal that we must revise things on which we reached agreement in an earlier conversation, and so on.

The sense that I am really talking with another – that we are, in our words, really in contact with each other – involves a sense of the difference that what each of us says makes in our lives: a sense that will (other things being equal) be undermined if, in practice, the other goes on to speak as if this conversation had never taken place. The sense that I am in contact with another in this conversation is a sense of an indefinite range of possible developments in our relations with each other. It matters to me – in a way that is not easy to articulate – that she would not simply look bemused if I did (which I do not plan to) take the discussion in this direction, or that. This expectation (if that is the right word) is, we might say, an aspect of the ‘attitude towards a soul’ of which Wittgenstein speaks. The point here is of the same form as the fact that taking our exchange of smiles to have been a genuine contact between us involves a sense of an indefinite range of ways in which things might go between us. Smiles are only what they are because of the particular ways in which they are characteristically embedded in our lives. And, in a particular case, her smile wasn’t what I thought it was if it turns to a sneer as soon as my back is turned, or if she does not even recognize me when we next meet.

4. ‘Philosophical puzzlement: unless this does – or may – threaten the possibility of understanding altogether, then it is not the sort of thing that has worried philosophers’ (*WPD*, p. 34). The scepticism that Rhees suggests is central to philosophy – perhaps which defines a concern as *philosophical* in character – is one that calls in question

the possibility of *learning* anything in that sense – the possibility of understanding people. The possibility of saying anything. . . . Whether it makes any difference what you say – whether there is any point in it anyway; whether there is any point in saying anything anyway’ (*WPD*, p. 277).

I have spoken of a way in which a doubt of this kind might arise in relation to a particular conversation. But how should we understand the enormous importance that Rhees attaches to the generalized version of such a doubt?

In rejecting the imagery that pictures meaning and understanding as processes that ‘lie beneath the surface of our words’, and, with that, in acknowledging the sense in which the future developments themselves may be what matters to us when we are concerned whether another has really understood what was said, we might suppose that the philosophically crucial form of scepticism – the scepticism of which Rhees speaks – is a scepticism about the future: when we recognize the commitments for the future that are involved in our taking ourselves to understand each other, we will, or perhaps ‘should’, feel a concern as to whether we have adequate grounds for supposing that our expectations will be fulfilled: just as I may, in a particular case, have such doubts when I sense that another is not genuinely engaged in a conversation.

It is, perhaps, in some such way as this that some have suggested that Wittgenstein shows us that language – the possibility of discourse – has a much more fragile basis than we might have supposed. I believe, however, that once we disentangle a number of different strands in that thought, we will realize that there is nothing left to it. The ‘rails running to infinity’ of which Wittgenstein is supposed to have disabused us were not ones that we *could* not fall off; they were ones that if we *did* fall off we would no longer be speaking.¹⁴ With that, once we are clear of any confusions that may arise there, we should acknowledge that my confidence that discussion with you will not fall to pieces is no more fragile in its base than is my confidence that I will continue to be able to make sense of your facial ex-

pressions, and to interact with you through these and other gestures. And, in the light of what has been said so far, any general scepticism that rears its head here will, it seems, be simply an application of the scepticism about induction that Hume brought so clearly into focus.

Well, I am uncertain here. I am not sure if we should say that Wittgenstein has brought to our attention a sense in which our attempts to speak with others could fall into chaos at any moment: a sense in which come tomorrow we could find that, for example, our attempts to speak about the colors of things founders hopelessly in the face of our utterly discordant judgments. However that may be, I doubt whether *that* is what Rhees has in mind when he speaks of something that may ‘threaten the possibility of understanding altogether’. To appreciate the form of scepticism of which Rhees speaks we will do better, I suspect, to reflect on the way in which we sometimes know that a particular conversation *will* almost certainly founder very rapidly if we push it in certain directions. It might, for example, be clear to me (it often has) that a particular discussion, on a topic with a religious dimension, would fall into a hopeless sense of failure to make contact if it drifted just a little further in the direction, say, of ‘eternal life’ or ‘the power of prayer’. To the extent that this is so the claim that we are in real dialogue – that there is genuine contact between us in the discussion that is actually taking place – is, to some degree, compromised. My sense of what is happening between us now cannot be divorced from my recognition of the severe limits on how things could go between us in this area.

That example has a number of distinctive features. I have (I am supposing) a fairly clear picture of the limits to our possible discussion, those limits lie very close to our actual discussion in the sense that movement in that direction may be almost inevitable if it is not self-consciously curtailed, and an awareness of these limits is, perhaps, almost bound to have significant bearing on my sense of the contact that I have with you in the discussion that we are having. We can, however, be sure that in many (I would assume all) discussions there are limits of forms that are analogous, though lacking these distinctive features. I was speaking of one case of such limits when I noted the sense in which there are almost certainly differences between us – between myself and others with whom I regularly converse – in the ‘use’ of the word ‘pain’: differences, for example, in the details of how we might ‘weigh’ the pain of another as a reason for helping her, or of the circumstances in which we would judge another to be in pain. I earlier re-

fused to answer my question: Are we to say on account of *these* differences in use that you and I mean something different by the word, and so mean something different when, in a particular context, we say ‘John is in pain’? While I am not at all sure that, asked in the abstract, the question has an answer, most, I guess, will be very reluctant to say that difficulties that we might run into when it comes to tramps imply that we mean something different when we speak of John’s pain. For all that, we will have failed to acknowledge the importance of words in our lives if we fail to recognize the sense in which those differences *do* bear on our conversation about John. This, I think, is something that Rhees is stressing when he writes:

So what they say here is connected with other things that they say, and it is connected with other things that other people say (I think that is important anyway). And that this *discussion* is connected with other things that other people say, and in that kind of way belongs to a language. (*WPD*, p. 159)

What connects the discussion that, let us suppose, we later have about a tramp with our current discussion about John – connects them in a way such that we can say that the same word, ‘pain’, features in both of them – is the way in which what is said in the one conversation might have significance for what is said in the other. For example: the way in which you might place my very marginal regard for the tramp’s pain beside the deep concern that I felt to be clearly in order in relation to the sufferings of my friend. And the fact, if it is a fact, that I acknowledge this to be an appropriate taking up of my earlier words about John is one of the things you may expect from me to the extent that you took me to be speaking seriously when I said of John, ‘He’s in pain; we must help him’. In this sense, the fact that our discussion would fall apart – that we would be unable to agree at the most basic level – if it turned to a tramp, *does* have a bearing on our conversation about John. It has a bearing of the same form – though, no doubt, of lesser degree – as do the limitations in the possible lines of development in my discussion with the religious believer. The contact that I have with Mary in our discussion of John’s pain is, in some measure, compromised by the fact that there is this limitation in the direction in which it could be developed.

In appreciating the form of the connection between ‘meaning’ and ‘use’, we appreciate that – even in those cases in which we would never, in the normal course of things, say that we do not attach the same meanings to the words we use – we must *expect* to run into difficulties in our conversa-

tions with others: to find ourselves at points at which our words do not quite meet each other. Realism would, I think, suggest that something of this form is happening all the time, and that we generally skirt round it. We are momentarily baffled, perhaps, about how she could say what she is now saying in view of what she said yesterday. Perhaps a little pressing would reveal a mutual misunderstanding that might readily be resolved; but we do not pause to find out, or if we do, and fail to locate the misunderstanding, other pressures move us rapidly beyond the sticking point.

How much should we be concerned about the fact that there will be such points of breakdown: of mutual incomprehension? How much should we be concerned about the fact that, or the possibility that, if the discussion moved in this direction it would fall apart? Scepticism, as Rhees understands this, is, perhaps, in part a deep awareness and concern about these possibilities: a sense that, if the attempt to take up my words in this or that direction is inevitably going to founder at some point, it makes no difference what I say; as we might also express this: a sense that if it should turn out that you and I cannot agree about the color of bluebells we do not *really* mean the same by the word 'blue' – are not really making contact when we talk together about the wonderful blue of the sky today; scepticism is a doubt as to 'whether there is any point in saying anything anyway'. To which we might feel like replying that a scepticism of that form would be an exaggerated response to what are generally marginal – in the sense of having little significance – possibilities. But if we do not recognize that such scepticism is an exaggerated response to *something* – that it is taking, perhaps to an unreasonable extreme, something that is fundamental to our sense of the contact that we make with others in conversation – then we have failed to recognize language as anything other than a functional device for achieving, through others, our own independent ends.

5. The idea that a central task of philosophy is to characterize our 'use' of particular words is closely linked with the idea that reflection on the distinction between sense and nonsense is central to philosophy. The reflection takes the form of trying to draw the distinction in particular cases; and also, at another level, it takes the form of trying to characterize the distinction that we are drawing. Wittgenstein is warning of dangers that lie in certain ways of thinking of the distinction when he writes: 'When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from

circulation'.¹⁵ One might, however, be concerned that it is a rash man who would suggest of any form of words that it be 'excluded from the language'. The rashness lies, at least in part, in the fact that such a suggestion will always invite those with a taste for a certain kind of inventiveness to construct a context in which this form of words would transparently be in place. The moral is: It is not the *sentence* – 'I can never feel another's pain', 'Jones travelled back in time', 'Mary found herself in someone else's body', 'I know that this is a hand', and so on – that is senseless; but, rather, the thing that someone has said on a particular occasion.

Just as we may think of the meaning of a word as something that lies behind its use – as something that allows its employment in certain combinations with other words, but excludes it from others – we may think of understanding what someone has just said as identifying the meaning that lies behind the words: a meaning that dictates how what he said might be appropriately developed. But understanding what someone has said just *is* knowing how it is to be taken; and to show that what he said was senseless is to bring to light an illusion he was under concerning the directions in which his words may be taken up and developed in conversation. For example, when, in philosophy, someone says 'I can never feel another's pain', we may suspect that the words – as uttered here – go with a picture of a line of development that would run into the sand if consistently pursued.

It might be added that in a huge amount of what we say there is serious unclarity about *how* it is to be taken. There is no straightforward answer to the question: would this – or this – be a taking up of her words in a direction consonant with her meaning? Is the sense of talk of 'life after death' on *her* lips such that 'psychical experiences' might appropriately be thought of as providing evidential support for the claim that there *is* life after death? There may be no straightforward answer to this question. (Suppose, for example, that while she can be tempted down that path she would never have found herself on it without the influence of this powerful speaker.) In so far as there is no answer to this question there is an unclarity in what she is saying. With that, we may often be in a position in which we have to say: in so far as his words are to be taken up in *this* way they run rapidly into the sand; but in so far as they are to be taken up in *this* way they do not.

The clarity that we strive for in paradigmatically *philosophical* contexts (for example: in relation to ‘the privacy of sensations’) is of exactly the same form as, and is often continuous with, a clarity that we strive for in other contexts: indeed, we might say that striving for such clarity is fundamental to *speaking*. And, to the extent that we suspect that a failure of such clarity is a pervasive feature of our lives, we see here, perhaps, another dimension of the scepticism of which Rhees speaks: a scepticism about ‘whether there is any point in saying anything anyway’.

6. Many philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein have thought of their task as centrally involving, on the one hand, the characterization of our ‘use’ of particular words, and, on the other, a disentangling of sense and nonsense. We might say that these are both responses to scepticism as Rhees understands this in that they are attempts to show that it *does* make a difference what you say: that there *is* a point in saying anything. But if we express the matter in this way we must acknowledge that ‘showing’ that this is so cannot, at this point, be sharply separated from the attempt to *make* it so. Thus, the attempt to reveal that a sense that we thought we saw in a certain way of speaking was no sense can hardly be separated from the attempt to disentangle the hopeless lines of development of our words from ones that may lead somewhere. This goes with (though a bit more work is needed to show just *how* it goes with) my earlier suggestion that characterizing the ‘use’ of a particular word, in the sense in which the philosopher may attempt to do this, involves judgement in that it involves making distinctions between what is significant in our use of the word and what is not.¹⁶ In making such distinctions, the philosopher will, as I expressed it, commit himself to claims about how the word *is* to be used.¹⁷

Whether or not we speak of the search for sense in what we say, and the search for ways of speaking that will extend the possibilities of discussion between human beings, as parts of the task of ‘*philosophy*’ is, I think, of little importance. For all that, precedent may indicate that there is a strong case for saying that it is: for the attempt to respond to a scepticism about ‘whether there is any point in saying anything anyway’ is certainly closely related to the familiar philosophical search for ways of speaking of the world that would be accessible to, as they say, *any* rational being; or, in a different imagery, the search for ‘a description of the world as it is in itself’.

The philosophical search for ‘a description of the world as it is in itself’ has, in practice, sometimes taken the form of an attempt to identify ways of thinking and speaking that must be shared by *any* being whom we could recognize as thinking or speaking at all. It is argued, for example, that identifying shapes roughly as we do is an inescapable feature of thought, as identifying colors roughly as we do is not; and, with that, that a scepticism about whether there are material bodies possessing shape is not a genuine option. The phrase ‘a description of the world as it is in itself’ may, however, acquire some of its mesmerizing power from another set of connotations: connotations that are more closely linked with our everyday attempts to determine the truth about some matter.

The kind of breakdown that occurs when you and I cannot agree on the color of a distant building, on whether what someone said was rude, or on whether someone is in pain or angry, may be contrasted with more radical forms of breakdown in which, as we may be tempted to put it, what is at issue is not ‘the facts’ but ‘the way in which the facts are to be characterized’.¹⁸ The difference is sometimes marked in terms of a distinction between cases in which, on the one hand, two people who, sharing their ‘concepts’, disagree about the facts, and, on the other, ones in which two people employ different concepts in their descriptions of the world. Again, the difference may be characterized in terms of a contrast between, on the one hand, ‘particular judgements that we make’, and, on the other, ‘the standards that we employ in making judgements’. These ways of speaking of ‘different concepts’ or ‘differences in standards’ are characteristically part of a package of measures to resist an empiricist imagery that models all clarity of thought on good eyesight: that views the procedure for the resolution of all differences between people on the model of stepping closer to the thing about which we differ, or procuring a more powerful microscope. We may seek to reject such imagery through a denial that ‘the world’ provides a common measure to which we can appeal in an attempt to resolve fundamental differences in ways of speaking and living. And Wittgenstein is warning us against the imagery when he insists that what ‘lies at the bottom of the language game’ is not a kind of seeing, and that ‘What has to be accepted, the given, is . . . *forms of life*’.¹⁹ But if ‘the bottom of the language game’ is the point at which the possibility of rational persuasion gives out, we can note that we have been given no grounds for supposing that there is, inevitably, such a point. From the fact that peering more closely is not going to advance our attempts to resolve the difference be-

tween us it does not follow that *nothing* could do so. And speaking in terms of our operating with different ‘concepts’ or different ‘standards for judging’ is, I think, likely only to obscure the possibilities. For we may then feel ourselves confronted with a choice between, on the one hand, picturing our ‘concepts’ or ‘standards’ as things that might be compared with the world in a way akin to that in which a color sample might be compared with a particular scrap of material, and, on the other, picturing what separates us from others who think very differently from us over certain areas as a non-negotiable ‘given’.

If you want to convince me (who, on careful inspection, have no doubt that they are best described as ‘purple’) that bluebells are blue you are likely to speak, not about the ‘standards with which I operate here’ (for I don’t operate with any standards), but about bluebells and their likeness to other, unambiguously blue things; and (in certain respects) similarly if you want to convince someone that a great ape may grieve for the loss of its child or suffer from debilitating boredom, to convince Wittgenstein that constant interruption of another is ‘rude’ even within the context of philosophical discussion, or to convince a more radical sceptic about rudeness that some actions are correctly described in these terms. Say, if you want, that in these cases we operate with different ‘concepts’: it may help to remind us that the difference between us is not to be resolved by stepping closer to that about which we do not agree (the bluebells, for example). But to say that it is not to be resolved in *that* way is not to say that it is not to be resolved at all; nor that a resolution must involve discussion of us (our ‘concepts’) as opposed to discussion of bluebells or great apes.

7. Rhee would, I suspect, say that the forms of scepticism that have had a central place in philosophy – scepticism about the external world or about the past, for example – are best viewed as forms of, or, perhaps, displacements of, a scepticism about the reality of discourse. The suggestion may gain credibility through reflection on, for example, the way in which Descartes grounds the demand to answer scepticism in his observation of the breakdowns in agreement in the most basic features of our understanding. We might, however, add that the ‘scepticism’ to which Rhee gives central place may provide a more perspicuous view of the character of the issues. It is more perspicuous in that it highlights a sense in which philosophical discussion is essentially *personal* – by contrast with a familiar – Cartesian

– idea that the understanding that we seek in philosophy is radically *impersonal*.

‘It is important to insist on the way in which philosophical problems are personal – just as scepticism is’ (*WPD*, p. 39). In its concern with language, philosophy is concerned with relations between people. But Rhees is, I take it, suggesting something further: that the form of that concern is essentially personal – in a sense, I take it, in which, for example, physics is not. The notion of the ‘personal’ here has, perhaps, two dimensions. First, it is important that, in philosophy, I speak for myself – I take responsibility for my words – in a sense that, or a degree to which, that is not so in physics. Or, perhaps better: being fully in my words calls on more dimensions of myself than does being fully in my words in physics. And second, it is important that in philosophy I have a strong sense of those to whom my words are addressed; and, with that, a strong sense of the particularity of the conversational context: a strong sense of what is to be said at just *this* point given whom I am talking with and where we have reached in our discussion. Those two points are connected in (very roughly) this way: taking my words as I mean them will, in philosophy, call on aspects of the other that can less readily be taken for granted than is the case in physics.²⁰

The attempt to enhance ‘the reality of discourse’ – to deepen the links between us that are involved in conversation – is, I take it, unambiguously ‘personal’ in the above sense. An attempt to bridge the kinds of gap between another and myself that I have mentioned – a gap, for example, over the intelligibility of speaking of ‘grief’, ‘boredom’ or ‘pain’ in relation to a particular species of animal – is likely to call on widely ramifying aspects of each of us; and, with that, has little chance of success if it is not highly sensitive to the particular conversational context. In being clear about the *kind* of issue with which one is dealing here one is clear that we should not expect to find a form of reasoning that will have a grip with *anyone*, no matter where they may now stand. And provided one does not suppose (as, of course, many philosophers have) that only what is impersonal in that sense is correctly described as ‘*reasoning*’, one will not think it follows that the clarity we are striving for here is not a clarity about fish, great apes, or whatever it may be. Further, if we wish to articulate this as an attempt to characterize ‘the world as it is in itself’, there need, perhaps, be nothing wrong with that way of expressing the matter. No doubt there *is* generally something wrong with that way of expressing the matter. The

idea that the aim of philosophy is to characterize ‘the world as it is in itself’ generally comes with a good deal of baggage: it may come with an imagery that suggests that success is inevitable so long as both parties have good eyesight, a capacity for logic, and sufficient patience and good will; or an imagery that suggests that our attempt is only serious in so far as we disengage from everything ‘personal’ in us – everything that we might lose without losing our ‘rationality’. But, as I have tried to indicate, there are dangers that we may throw out some of the traditional aspirations of philosophy with the bathwater of the baggage.

8. Rhees’s views on language lie at the heart of his philosophy – in more ways than one. The centrality that he gives to *conversation* in his discussions of language is reflected in the place that philosophy seems to have occupied in his own life, and, in particular, in the character of the writings that he produced. As Lars Hertzberg has remarked:

Rhees was engaging in dialogue, not debate; a distinction he clarifies in one of his notes: ‘what we call debating . . . is a matter of trying to make an impression on somebody else than the person *with* whom, or *against* whom, you are talking – it is not even clear *to* what person you are talking, so that a debate in this way is not a conversation in one sense at all’. Whereas academic writing tends to have the character of debate, it is clear that what counted for Rhees was conversation in the full sense, an exchange in which there was no doubt about who you were talking *to*.²¹

Rhees’s reluctance to publish (or lack of interest in publishing), along with the fact that much of his writing was in the form of notes to individual friends or colleagues, is, I take it, at least in part a reflection of his sense of the importance for *saying* something of a particular conversational context. Philosophy is no exception to this general principal. Indeed, it may represent a particularly clear instance of it. One’s sense of what needs to be said in philosophy, and the sense of what one says, cannot be divorced from the fact that one is addressing someone who is stuck at a particular point, or is in the grip of a particular confusion, or who is puzzled in the same way as oneself, and so on. To the extent that publication involves *no* sense of those to whom one’s words are addressed, its character as language is, one might say, compromised. Now in practice, I take it, a philosopher who publishes a book or article always has *some* idea of a community to whom his words are addressed. But the sense that one sometimes has in reading philosophy that enormously important questions are being discussed in

terms that nobody could possibly take seriously may be connected with unclarities about just who it is that is being addressed.

Rhees's views on language also lie at the heart of his philosophy in the sense that whether he is writing about science, religion, morality, mathematics or art a central concern – perhaps *the* central concern – is to draw attention to the particular character of the discourse with which we are dealing. Much of our confusion in philosophy, Rhees thinks, reflects our mixing up of different forms of discourse. That thought is, of course, a familiar one; but it takes on a quite distinctive form in Rhees's hands. In a letter to Peter Winch, written in 1954, Rhees writes:

It seems to me that your chief difficulty is regarding the language of religion and its connexion with religious life. You still seem to want to think of the language of religion as though it were in some way comparable with the language in which one describes matters of fact; and of religious practices as though they were in some way comparable, perhaps, with the practices of physical culture.²²

In another letter he writes:

When you raise the question 'What are moral statements like?', you seem to be asking what *other* statements they are like – how we ought to class them: Are we describing or ejaculating? – and this seems to me the wrong way to begin. It seems to assume that they must be a special case of some other class of statement. Whereas I want to say, 'Never mind that. When and where do you find them? Under what circumstances do you know you have to do with moral statements? And what sort of questions, what sort of problems, what sort of worries and what sort of answers do they call forth?'²³

It may be helpful to place these passages beside another extract from the letter to Winch quoted above:

I would emphasize that there could not be religion and there could not be love of man and woman unless there were language anyhow; unless, I mean, people used language in their lives – or, to put it the other way round, unless they lived the kind of lives that people live with language.²⁴

I quote this passage in part to draw attention to a crucial contrast with the familiar philosophical concern with the question of whether there can be *thought* – or a particular kind of thought – without language. In Rhees's hands questions about the connection between language and 'thought' are

transformed into question about the connection between language and particular aspects of our *lives*: not ‘thought about God’, but religion – that is to say, religious *life*. But I quote the above passage also in order to highlight something else that is, I think, fundamental to Rhees’s understanding of these issues – to highlight this by *contrast* with the way in which he articulates his point in that passage. Later in the same letter Rhees writes:

The language does not bring about the ‘difference’ of being in love, but the language is a part of that difference – I had almost said ‘*is* that difference’, because the language is not the words on paper nor even the reciting of them, the language is the way it is used and the role it plays, the language is all it means to him in using it and to her in listening.²⁵

The language *is* the difference – or, at least, part of it. It is not a *condition of* there being love in a life: not, in that sense, something without which there *could not* be love of man and woman. Without the language of love there *would not* be love of man and woman.²⁶ Our difficulty in holding on to that distinction – or, perhaps, in thinking it a distinction of any importance – reflects, or is an aspect of, our failure fully to acknowledge that to speak of a language is to speak of words as they feature in our lives. We do not have here two things – love and its language, or religion and its language – between which there are connections for the philosopher to investigate. As Rhees writes elsewhere: ‘We learn to live in somewhat the way in which we learn to speak, and we learn to live . . . *in* learning to speak’.²⁷

NOTES

¹ *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 32. (Hereafter *WPD*.)

² Not that Rhees rules out an investigation that could be described in this way. He notes, rather, that ‘it may be very ambiguous to speak about the conditions on which the possibility of understanding depends’ (*WPD*, p. 34). One form of investigation that a number of philosophers, including some strongly influenced by Wittgenstein, have found highly suspect involves, as it is sometimes put, employing our concepts to characterize certain features of nature on which our possessing those very concepts depends. Whether or not such an investigation would be of philosophical interest, there are, so far as I can see, no grounds for supposing that it would involve an objectionable

circularity. I cannot pursue the question of exactly how this form of investigation relates to that which Rhee does exclude. I mention it simply in order to warn against the possible conflation of different issues.

³ Is it not clear that I share a language with people with whom I am not in discussion; and that it is the fact that we share a language that makes possible my speaking with them? We must, of course, take Rhee in a way that acknowledges the sense in those claims; and doing so would require a little more care than I have taken with his remark here.

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: 1953), #242.

⁵ And so I think Rhee would have significant reservations about, for example, the following remark from one of İlham Dilman's last books: 'Those concepts belong to the language we speak and that language is rooted in our life and culture' (*Wittgenstein's Copernican Revolution* (Basingstoke, 2002) p. 167).

⁶ Wittgenstein's analogy with continuing an arithmetical series – an activity that is essentially solitary in a sense in which a conversation is not – is, perhaps, one of the ways in which Rhee suspects that Wittgenstein's thinking is distorted by his 'idea of a close parallel between mathematics and language' (*WPD*, p. 204).

⁷ *Philosophical Investigations*, #108.

⁸ It is, I find, helpful here to compare the idea of characterizing the 'use' of a word with that of characterizing the 'use' of a smile.

⁹ I am indebted to Olli Lagerspetz for bringing to my attention the importance of thinking about this kind of example.

¹⁰ Alternatively, he may – as some do – think of himself as characterizing some core, which is grasped by everyone who understands the word, and from which all other aspects of its use flow.

¹¹ Partly because I am not at all sure that this notion, which plays quite local and specific roles in our normal thought, is well suited to the philosophical work to which it is often put.

¹² That, I take it, is a central feature of Rhee's doubt about whether Wittgenstein's builders, as they are presented to us, are *speaking* at all.

¹³ Some might want to add that none *should* be.

¹⁴ Though that remark may betray a failure fully to acknowledge the power of the philosophical imagery.

¹⁵ *Philosophical Investigations*, # 500.

¹⁶ Consider, for example, the woman who, in her talk of life after death, is occasionally drawn into speculations about psychical research; even though it is clear, or seems so to us, that such speculations are quite discordant with the main thrust of that way of speaking in her life.

¹⁷ To express the point in terms employed by Stephen Mulhall in a discussion of Stanley Cavell, a characterization of use is an attempt to elicit the agreement of others;

it is an aspect of the ‘search for community’ (*Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary*, 11, 43).

¹⁸ Though we should, surely, be at least slightly embarrassed if we find ourselves putting it this way.

¹⁹ *On Certainty* (Oxford, 1969), #204; *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 226.

²⁰ Though this point needs considerably more careful handling than I have given it here. The contemporary astronomer, for example, is writing for a group that does not include people who suppose that the Earth is flat and the stars are set in a dome that arches over it. If he wanted to address such people he would have to speak in very different terms: would have to if he wants his words to be something other than one more thing to add to the disconnected jumble. (Somewhat as most popular expositions of the latest developments in astro-physics are just one more thing to add to the disconnected jumble.)

²¹ Lars Hertzberg, ‘Rush Rhees on Philosophy and Religious Discourse’, *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001), pp. 431-442. The Rhees quotation is from *WPD*, p. 202.

²² Rush Rhees, *On Religion and Philosophy*, p. 39.

²³ *Without Answers* (London, 1969) p. 104.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁶ This is a point with which, I think, Wittgenstein struggled. The struggle is seen in the following ‘exchange’ in *Zettel*: “‘If humans were not in general agreed about the colors of things, if undetermined cases were not exceptional, then our concept of color could not exist.’ No: – our concept *would* not exist.’ (#351). It is seen too in the backsliding of the following, much quoted, passage from *Philosophical Investigations*: ‘If language is to be a means of communication there *must* be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments’ (#242; my italics).

²⁷ The sentence reads in full: ‘We learn to live in somewhat the way in which we learn to speak, and we learn to live *as* we can learn to speak (or: *in* learning to speak.)’, *On Religion and Philosophy* p. 187. I am not clear what to make of the ‘can’.

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