RECOVERING UNDERSTANDING

by

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ABSTRACT

The history of theoretical progress is also a history of increases in the skill with which innovations are linguistically proposed. One dimension of this refinement is the difficulty of the task of recovering past understandings theoretical terms. A study of ancient philosophy reveals vivid examples. Standard approaches to ancient texts provide evidence of, but do not sufficiently illuminate, the difficulty. My biology of language, and essentially diachronic, approach focuses neither on understanding the ancients, nor on overcoming the difficulty in understanding them, but rather on understanding those features of the difficulty which my approach makes apparent. George Steiner provides the starting point for a discussion of ways of understanding the difficulty. Leonard Palmer's paper on Greek *justice* is represented as the minimal standard of methodological care required of any attempt to overcome it. The terms, *logos* and *cause*, are examined as examples of our difficulty in understanding inherited theoretical language.

To Jared, Julia and Jaime
whose language acquisition I continue to witness
with interest and delight.

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Every graduate student adopts their specialty largely because of their undergraduate experience. My experience has been no different. The background understanding for my thesis arose from my pre-graduate immersion in a specialized approach to the study of language. The goal of undergraduate training is not to sell a product but to begin understanding. And with that beginning understanding comes the recognition of certain kinds of problems, and some feeling for the methods by which we can try to solve them. As a qualifying graduate student taking undergraduate philosophy courses, I was one amongst a group of students with a shared understanding, and with a

shared interest in certain problems. For some in this group, their interest emerged during a course on ancient philosophy. The problems that they brought to our discussions inspired this thesis. I wish to thank each member of that group for his unique contribution to my developing understanding: Jamie Alexander, Neil Bennet, Andrew Hartline, Keir Thornburg, Scott Webber, and Cory Verbauwhede.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Now, he who is perplexed and wonders believes himself to be ignorant[1]
(Aristotle)

Preamble

Most broadly speaking, this thesis is about the nature of philosophical perplexity. I say this because, although more particularly it concerns the difficulties of the task of recovering the understandings of early Greek philosophers, that investigation raises the issue as to the extent to which the same considerations apply to understandings of later ages, even those of our own. To recover an understanding is to grasp what someone understands herself to be saying; our difficulties in grasping what the ancients understood themselves to be saying may, in some measure, be difficulties in understanding generally.

Throughout this paper I am acquiescing in the conversational use of the language of understanding. On that use, what does 'understanding' consist in? No more than our capacity to converse using a vocabulary. This capacity, however, includes more than a grasp of the 'meaning' of words; it also requires, among other things, a grasp of how they are used in social settings, of what prompts their production and their effects, of what previous uses are being exploited. How far beyond a conversational level of understanding of 'understanding' (or of any word for that matter) can we hope to have? It needs to be shown first that there is a level of understanding beyond the conversational.

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[1] Taylor, A.E. 1949. *Aristotle on His Predecessors: Being the First Book of His Metaphysics.* Chicago: Open Court Publishing. p.75.

As I comment later, there is no guarantee that there is one. If, indeed, all we can have is a conversational understanding of any vocabulary, then it seems incumbent upon philosophers to cultivate to a high degree their capacity to converse and to study its limitations as a resource. It is a central claim of this thesis that a diachronic account of vocabulary can make an important contribution to our understanding: namely that (a) it cannot be taken for granted, and (b) that certain quite specific difficulties attend it.

What does a grasp of archaic understanding require? Ideally, we could give criteria for a minimally satisfactory understanding. Unfortunately, we lack the original understanding as a standard measure. For example, we know virtually nothing that Thales knew that would correctly explain why he introduced the language of *water* as he did. Failing this ideal, we can ask what should be the minimal standard of *effort* required in support of a purported recovery. As I see the difficulties, it may be that we can never recover more than a glimmering of archaic understanding, and even then, lacking a measure, not know how dim a glimmer; it may be that the best we can ask for is a best effort given available resources. Attempting to answer the question as to what that amounts to may be considered the general aim of this thesis.

Two inseparable problems emerge at the outset. The first is methodological: what are the difficulties? How do they arise? How can one measure them? What means can be devised to overcome them? The second is a problem of expressiveness: how to talk about the difficulties? What would be a sufficiently neutral theoretical language? Both problems are daunting. Within the limited scope of this thesis, and to the best of my capacity, expertise and resources, my discussion of these questions will proceed along the following lines. I begin this chapter with some remarks about the nature of philosophical

difficulty. I then discuss briefly a biological approach to understanding it, one that includes the twin-notions of linguistic innovation and intellectual predicament. These two notions are central to an ensuing discussion of language in general and theoretical language in particular. The chapter closes with an exposition of two myths that may waylay an unguided student new to ancient philosophy. I position my approach somewhere between these two myths. In Chapter 2, using the work of literary theorist, George Steiner, as a starting point, and as a foil, I explore the nature of our general difficulties in understanding text, and critically discuss some of the resources that we typically use to overcome them. Chapter 3 offers a critical exposition of L.R. Palmer's *The Indo-European Origins of Greek Justice* as an exemplification of a plausible minimal standard of methodological care required of anyone attempting the task of recovering archaic understanding. Chapter 4 is devoted to the case studies of two words that have long exercised philosophers: *logos* and *cause*. My proposed aetiology of the difficulty of these words rests upon a diachronic account of the roles that they have played in successive conversational settings, including semantic propositions. In the case of the language of *cause,* the account takes us from the Roman's translation of Aristotle's *αιτία* to Hume's perplexity about causation. With *logos*, I trace its emergence as a philosophical term from Homer to the Christian New Testament. These case studies, I believe, strikingly illustrate the chief sources of our difficulties. That said, it bears emphasizing that this thesis is an attempt to articulate the nature of the difficulty of the task of recovering archaic understanding; I venture no philosophical analysis of these philosophically perplexing terms.

Section 1: Philosophical Difficulty

> *Reader: Miss Moore, your poetry is very difficult to read.*
> *Marianne Moore: It is very difficult to write*[2]

George Steiner would ask: what do Marianne Moore and her reader *mean* when they say that her poetry is difficult?[3] By contrast, I ask: what is the nature and source of their difficulty? What explains it? Steiner and I concur in our initial response to our different questions: they are questions about language more generally.[4] The fact that Steiner's primary interest is in understanding the difficulty of poetry and mine is in understanding the difficulty of philosophical writings need not affect our agreement, since, beyond the indisputable fact that much of western philosophy has been written in a poetic idiom, Parmenides and Schopenhauer being two exemplars, both poetry and philosophy are essentially linguistic phenomena. By 'poetic idiom', I simply mean the use of figurative language and non-prosaic form that, for the non-philosopher, may render the text as impenetrable as poetry. It follows that any sufficient explanatory model of language, and more particularly of linguistic difficulty, must find a place for both. Our methods must eventually diverge, but the nature of that divergence will become clear later.

My most general interest lies in the sort of difficulty we experience as philosophers in gaining more than a conversational, and yet less than a non-controversial, understanding of what it is we are talking about when we use certain words to explain the world. Words such as *cause*, *intention*, *meaning*, *justice*, *good*, *knowledge*, *virtue*, *agency*, *mind*, and *art* come readily to mind. Witness alone the river of ink spilled early in the

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[2] Knowles, Elizabeth. (1999). *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*. Oxford: O.U.P. p.530.5.
[3] Steiner, George. *On Difficulty and Other Essays*. 1980. Oxford. Oxford University Press p.18 (*My emphasis).*
[4] Ibid.

twentieth century to float some common philosophical understanding of the term *good*.[5] As for the word *cause*, Bryson Brown remarked recently:

> [the] ground here (causation) is notoriously treacherous. Careful, clear-headed philosophers have come to grief here, and will again.[6]

It is by no means certain that there is to be had any philosophically satisfying understanding of *any* words beyond the understanding required for their conversational use. Moreover, if that conversational understanding is insufficient for some philosophical purposes, then it is unclear whether those philosophical purposes can be served. On the face of it, the only degree of understanding we can be *assured* is accessible is that degree vouchsafed by the requirements of transmission of a language from one generation of its speakers to the next, at the current rate of linguistic change. Since, apparently, no higher level of understanding is required for the transmission, there is no guarantee that, by any intensity of intellectual effort, we can attain to one. Nor, for related reasons, is there any guarantee that any unified or consistent account of that conversational understanding can be given. The problem is compounded by the facts of linguistic change and linguistic innovation. These will emerge as central in my investigation. That there is on average a non-zero rate of change can be inferred from the fact that the ability to speak a language is no guarantee of an ability to speak any sufficiently archaic ancestral language. On a related point, Steiner, speaking of English literature, offers the following comment:

> Where a passage is historically remote, say in Chaucer, the business of internal translation tends towards being a bilingual process: eye and ear are kept alert to the necessity of decipherment. The more seemingly standardized the language—

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[5] For an overview Cf. Darwall, S. Gibbard, A. and Railton, P. 1997. *Moral Discourse & Practice*. New York: O.U.P.

[6] Brown, Bryson. September 2000. Critical Notice of D.H. Mellor the Facts of Causation. In *Canadian Journal of Philosophy Vol.30* Number 3.Calgary: University of Calgary Press. p. .494.

> the outward cast of the modern comes in with great speed after Dryden— the more covert are indices of semantic dating. We read as if time has had a stop.[7]

The fact of language change is also reasonably inferred from the fact that language is, in general, transmitted through its acquisition by children. Given the fact of language change, it follows that an essentially diachronic account of a vocabulary would contribute much to our best understanding of a vocabulary, even if that understanding can be no more than conversational.

The point can be illustrated by a mention of connective vocabulary. English, like every other natural language, owes all of its connective vocabulary to a consequent feature of language transmission: that is, the tendency for some relational vocabulary to become appropriated, through discernible stages, to connective use. In this process, two separate changes reinforce one another: morphological reduction, and the loss of relational information. In English, *Butan* (outside) gives us *but*; however, we (those of us outside of Scotland at any rate) lose the information (irrelevant to the transmission of *but* in its various non-relational uses) that it ever had a relational use; however, understanding that it did have that use, helps us understand its non-connective uses as in, 'no one but me'. Parallel remarks apply to other English connectives. As users of the language, we are ill placed to see how poorly we understand them, since, generally speaking, we have unexceptionable conversational facility with them. What's true of the consequences for populations of language users of the functionalization of lexical terms is true in spades of the emergent use of such terms in philosophical theories, but more on this later.

In investigating philosophical difficulty, I will pay particular attention to our difficulty in understanding what ancient philosophers understood *themselves* to be talking

[7] Steiner, George. 1977. *After Babel*. London: Oxford University Press. p. 28.

about. This will turn out to be a meaningless concept since my investigation of the difficulties, on a biological approach, will show that we can have no access to what ancient philosophers understood *themselves* to be talking about. It goes without saying that claiming such a result is not just within the provenance of a biological approach.[8] The more varied the approaches that have a similar outcome, the better the outcome is confirmed, and the more enriched our understanding. Further, the notion of a meaningless concept does not deter my project since I am after an understanding of the difficulties, of what prevents my access and, thus, makes the concept meaningless. I am not after a recovered archaic understanding.

The ancients are chosen for this project because they offer a number of attractive opportunities for study. First, they provide a dramatic case study of the intellectual difficulties generated by the facts of language change. I say 'dramatic' since the difficulty of recovering archaic understanding, on any account of language, is the extreme case. I say 'dramatic' also because accounts of archaic understanding have, and continue to be, conflicting and controversial. Second, by considering the historical uses of terms, we can see that our present difficulty with those terms is rooted in archaic difficulty. A third, if I may suppose that the ancients themselves would have experienced difficulties similar to ours, is that the difficulties propagated by linguistic change would constitute a shared character of the predicaments of intellectuals of both the present and archaic periods, and of all those between. Understanding the intellectual predicament of the ancients offers the possibility of shedding stark light upon the intellectual predicament of contemporary philosophy, and gives us a way of viewing current philosophical methods. As we shall

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[8] Cf. Pelletier, Francis Jeffrey. 1990. *Parmenides, Plato and the Semantics of Not-Being*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 1.

see, the notion of *intellectual predicament* will emerge as another central concept in my investigation.

I must stress that I am investigating difficulties of understanding not in order to overcome them, but to understand them. If we are to have any hope of recovering even a glimmering of an understanding of the ancient texts as understood by their authors, or, for that matter, of any text as understood by its author that was written, say, more than eighty years ago, then, I submit, a degree of intellectual adjustment, not to mention humility, is in order: we must first acknowledge, and then understand, the fundamental intellectual obstacles that lie in our path.

Section 2: Methodology

> *Clearly it would be a mistake to think that there is only one way to study ancient philosophy... Different approaches are appropriate for different interests, and the results one obtains are relative to this interest, and to the approach chosen.*[9]

Preamble

I am making no claims to originality in seeking to understand the difficulties that confront philosophers when attempting to recover archaic understanding. Michael Frede[10] and Francis J. Pelletier[11] are but two recent commentators on the topic. What I am claiming as unique is my chosen approach. Further, I am sure that there are many difficulties that I have not contemplated, and many more not made apparent by my approach. Not to put too fine a point on it, I am not interested in those difficulties for my current purpose. What motivates my project is an interest in understanding the nature of the difficulties that are made apparent, and, perhaps, may be illuminated, by a biological

[9] Frede. Michael. 1987. *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p. ix.
[10] Ibid. Introduction.
[11] Pelletier 1990. Chapter 1.

approach. My central questions are, given a physical understanding of language, what are the difficulties of the task in recovering archaic understanding, how do they arise, and what standards of methodological care are required for any satisfactory claim to have overcome them?

This physical approach, while giving due regard to other approaches to understanding language, is not after a semantic understanding of archaic vocabulary, whatever semantic theory might ground any such an account; nor is it after a biological account of meaning. In fact, the language of meaning plays no role in my thesis. Any use I make of the word 'semantic' is not to be taken as a technical use. I am using it in the ordinary way that most philosophers use it, for example, as in 'semantic ambiguity'.

Not being a student of linguistics, I confess ignorance as to past or current linguistic theories. But such ignorance is irrelevant since I am not seeking a theoretical integration with linguistics. My central worry is that I not claim anything that is not capable of integration with biological theories. One requirement for that integration, it seems to me, is that any satisfactory understanding of a biological entity takes account of its evolution; that a diachronic account contributes to an enriched understanding even if the that understanding remains at a conversational level.

(i) The biology of language

My essentially biological approach to investigating philosophical difficulty proceeds from two background presumptions both of which will be discussed in greater detail in Section 4. Together these assumptions sufficiently distinguish the biological approach to the study of language from the linguistic approach, two distinct approaches that have

grown out of different, and sometimes conflicting, intellectual traditions.[12] Prior to disclosing the assumptions, a few general remarks about those differences may be useful. The starting point of the biology of language as a philosophical method is the observation that language is a physical phenomenon, and that speech is its fundamental observable; that our linguistic productions are physical productions that bear physical effects. Thus, like Quine, we, 'ponder talk...as a physical phenomenon'[13]. The physical effects of a linguistic production, like the physical effects observed elsewhere in biology, have themselves a physical history, one that, to the extent that it has been recorded or can be inferred, provides the physical evidence that can confirm or disconfirm hypotheses concerning the nature of language. One now familiar example lies in the study of logicalization, the process by which natural languages evolve their connective vocabulary from the vocabulary of physical relation.

A primary, and telling, difference between the disciplines of the biology of language and of linguistics is their respective aetiologies. The biology of language has grown out of evolutionary neurobiology and anthropology, and not out of the philosophy of language or out of linguistics, which is itself an offspring of philosophy. Another significant difference is that, whereas the central interest of linguistics is in syntax, or language abstractly conceived, and in language competence rather then language performance, the central interest of the biology of language is in speech as one amongst the many physical sequencing capacities of humans. In this regard, the approach taken by biologers of language to philosophical questions is more continuous with the intellectual

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[12] For a fuller comparative analysis of the two approaches, cf. Lieberman, Philip. 2006. *Toward An Evolutionary Biology of Language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. p.15 ff. and pp.317-363.
[13] Quine, Willard Van Orman. 1960. *Word and Object*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. p.5.

point of view currently represented centrally by Phillip Lieberman[14] than with that of Noam Chomsky. For the student of philosophy, competency in the methods of the biology of language does not guarantee competence in those of linguistics, and vice versa.

(ii) Background assumptions

The first assumption grounding my investigation is this: speech has physical significance; we could explain that significance in the language of physics, physiology, and neuro-physiology. We call such an explanation *first-order.* But that it has that significance also requires explanation. Such an explanation requires a *second-order* theory. A natural place to find such a theory would seem to be in evolutionary biology. There, explanations are mainly second-order. We want to understand how the organs of current creatures have acquired their physical relations, and what they have inherited from the physical relations of ancestral organs. My second working assumption, therefore, is that there is an essentially temporal dimension to any understanding of a vocabulary; a vocabulary comes to have the physical significance, or effect, that it has because its ancestral vocabulary had the significance, or effect that it had.

Both assumptions are supported, either individually or in tandem, by a corpus of writings whose authors are drawn from a variety of disciplines and eras. To mention a few: John Locke[15], Jeremy Bentham[16] and John Tooke[17], a critic of John Locke (from

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[14] For a Lieberman bibliography, Cf. Lieberman op. cit. pp. 403-405.
[15] Cf. Locke, John. 1967. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.
[16] Cf. Bentham, Jeremy. 1983. *Collected Works.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[17] Cf. Tooke, John Horne. 1968. *Epea Pteróenta, or, The Diversions of Purley.* Menston, England: Scolar Press. Of relevance to my thesis, Tooke questions the propriety of introducing the language of ideas into an empirical theory.

philosophy), Derek Bickerton[18] and Philip Lieberman[19] (from biology, neurobiology), William Calvin[20] (from neuroscience), George Steiner[21] (from literary theory), L.R.Palmer[22] (from historical linguistics), Hans Aarsleff[23] (from the history of linguistics). Of course, despite my parenthetical categorizations, all of these authors take essentially inter-disciplinary approaches to their investigations. I propose to adopt that same spirit of inquiry by supposing that an adequate understanding of philosophical difficulty cannot ignore the work of non-philosophers. In this respect, my investigation is no different from that of a student of the philosophy of colour. As an investigation of colour vision must consult extra-philosophical disciplines, so must an exploration of philosophical difficulty. In this case, literary theorist (George Steiner), and historical linguist (L.R. Palmer) will receive some significant attention.

(iii) Methodological difficulties

How do we know when we've understood an ancient text? The answer is: we have no way of *knowing* on any exalted reading of that word. This becomes our first difficulty in attempting to recover archaic understanding. We have no independent standard against which to measure our understanding. Further, any attempt to explain our difficulties in understanding comes with the irresolvable difficulty that we are unable to define the parameters of our task. Not possessing any independently certified understanding of the

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[18] Cf. Bickerton, Derek.1992. *Language and Species*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
[19] Cf. Lieberman op. cit. Also, Lieberman, Philip. 1984. *The Biology and Evolution of Language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press and Lieberman, Philip. 2000. *Human Language and Our Reptilian Brain: The Subcortical Bases of Speech, Syntax and Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
[20] Cf. Calvin, William H.1996. *Cerebral Code: Thinking a Thought in the Mosaics of the Mind*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
[21] Steiner. op. cit
[22] Cf. Palmer, Leonard R. 1972. *Descriptive and Comparative Linguistics*. London: Faber & Faber.
[23] Cf. Aarsleff, Hans. 1983. *The Study of Language in England* 1780-1860. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

text, we are unable to measure the degree of our failure, or to articulate the limits of our understanding. However, it would seem safe to assume that the further back in time our investigation takes us, the less should be our confidence of success. At a sufficient temporal remove, questions about particular meanings become practically unanswerable.

My approach to understanding intellectual difficulties in understanding will attend to something that we can begin to do: that is, to articulate the nature of the difficulty. With this in hand, I hope to propose partial criteria of adequacy for investigations which in turn will perhaps suggest measures that can be taken against our own ignorance, what sorts of things we should find out, and how to choose between methods.

Two criteria of adequacy warrant immediate disclosure. The first is that interpretations must be based upon the highest available standard of methodological care. However, the task of setting a standard for study, even a minimal one, comes with its own set of difficulties. As with the degree of our failure to understand a text, there is an ineliminable temporal dimension to the level of care that we can hope to attain; it necessarily diminishes the more ancient the text. Recognizing that temporal diminution in our capacities is to begin to recognize the difficulties. We must all likely fall short of the requisite standard of care that would recover understanding; nevertheless, in order to do justice to the ancient texts, it behoves us to apply the best formulable standards. In order to illustrate the level of methodological care that I have in mind, I have devoted a chapter to the work of L. R. Palmer who, I would submit, has set the bar high, challenging future generations to go higher.

The second criterion is that any idiom we introduce in order to talk about the task of recovering archaic understanding must accommodate the facts of language change. I

will say more on this topic later. Suffice it to say at this point that it is here that the contrast with Steiner will become apparent. He persists in the use of such problematic vocabulary as *meaning*, *sense*, *convention* and *intention*. This kind of language creates, rather than eases, intellectual difficulty, since we have no theoretically adequate grasp of its vocabulary: the words constitute data that themselves require explanation. We can use it conversationally to good effect, but, as Steiner himself points out, we have no determinate model within which to fix it theoretically.[24] Being itself in need of explanation, it cannot be used to explain itself.

Is there a non-problematic idiom for talking about language more generally? The answer, given current levels of understanding, is, 'probably not'. The best that I can do is to take care that, in my selection of terms, I do not compound our difficulties. Since my interest lies in the emergence of theoretical language, it would seem preferable to use terms consistent with the emergent processes that characterize language change.

It bears emphasizing that the approach that I am applying does not seek to displace semantics as a way of studying language; it modestly offers an alternative path for intellectual exploration. Nor does it set out to reduce or to eliminate or, for that matter, to perform any philosophical analysis. I am merely trying to understand the nature of philosophical difficulty, and to sort out what standards of methodological care are adequate for any claims to understanding.

[24] Steiner 1980 p. 18.

Section 3: Investigative Concepts

(i) Linguistic innovation

Anyone wishing to say effectually something wholly new must either introduce a novel use of received language or create wholly novel items of speech. That said, outside of mathematics, it seems safe to say simply that we cannot effectually utter anything wholly new: to do so would require that a recognisable attribution that has never been made before be made to an object to which nothing has been previously attributed. We can of course speak gobbledygook or 'in tongues', but in both cases we would be relying on pre-existing phonetic items to produce the effect that something had been spoken. Linguistic innovation is, therefore, constrained. Consider two current examples, 'to google' and 'blog'. The first is an example of novel use, the verbalization of the proper noun 'Google', (the noun would have been appropriated from a pre-existing use; likely, in mathematics[25]); the second, cobbled together from 'web' and 'log' and then morphologically reduced, is an example of a novel word. But they are not *wholly* novel since they both exploit for their success the effects of pre-existing linguistic items. Nevertheless, although the first instance would be more conservative and the second more radical, both, on their introduction, create a difficulty for the audience in sorting out an acceptable response; for to say that one had said anything at all suggests a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable responses. So, we may ask, what could guide a listener in formulating an acceptable response to what has been said? We can, if we wish, replace this question with what I consider to be two questions central to my project. The first, which I'll call the *contemporaneous* question, is the more general of the two: what resources can the contemporary audience of such an utterance bring to bear upon the

[25] I am grateful to Dr. Pelletier for this point.

problem of understanding what has been uttered? The diachronic approach that I am advocating assumes, as a general rule, that our contemporaneous conversational understanding of linguistic innovation is guided by our conversational understanding of the use of its ancestral vocabulary (in the case of 'blog': 'web' and 'log'); that resources for understanding lie within past understanding. There may be, as we will see, other resources. The second, which I'll call the *retrospective* question, is highly specific, and will receive my particular attention: what resources can we rely on for understanding what *earlier* audiences understood when *they* were presented with a novel utterance? In the second case, a set of subsidiary questions is suggested: what resources can we summon to aid us in gaining understanding: What tools can we assemble? What methods can we devise?

Compositionality

I raise (in order to set aside) the supposition that the weight of the difficulty might be borne by a property, or cluster of properties, of language that linguists and philosophers generally refer to collectively as *compositionality*. First put forward by Frege, the principle of semantic compositionality has been variously expressed[26]; the following will serve as an illustration:

> ***The Principle of Semantic Compositionality*** is the principle that the meaning of an expression is a function of, and only of, the meanings of its parts together with the method by which those parts are combined.[27]

The doctrine is supposed to explain our capacity to cope with novelty in linguistic production. However, sufficiently many general doubts about the doctrine have been

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[26] Pelletier has cited 11 different ways of describing the principle. See Pelletier, Francis Jeffrey. 1994. The Principle of Semantic Compositionality. In *Topoi* 13. pp. 11-24. Reprinted in S. Davies and B. Gillon (eds.). 2004. *Semantics: A Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 134.

[27] Ibid. p. 133.

raised in sufficiently many quarters that we cannot quite take its assurances for granted.[28] One of the central doubts about its efficacy is that the principle is not an empirical hypothesis, and cannot be unless we can generate empirical principles about its constituent parts. Groenendijk et al. have observed the following:

> [when] it comes to the nature of semantics, one seems hard pressed to come up with general principles that are truly empirical in nature.[29]

Groenendijk *et al.* have argued recently that, notwithstanding the general doubts, a merely methodological remnant of compositionality is useful as a way of doing semantics.[30] Methodologically, they accept two residual assumptions (a) that the meaning of a complex expression can be understood by the meaning of its parts, that is, both the syntactic and semantic values of the expression and the relationships between them,[31] and (b) that natural language comprises a large set of these parts that can be combined in an indefinite variety of ways.[32] Unfortunately, at the very outset, and at the level at which I am approaching the problem of philosophical difficulty; even the methodological residue of compositionality that they are prepared to endorse raises some problems. If what is meant by 'syntactic part' is the role assigned to the functional, or grammatical, elements of an expression, then I am unwilling to take the distinction between the functional and non-functional features of a sentence as clear. The reason for my reticence is that all functional vocabulary is the product of the functionalization of non-functional vocabulary. In present-day English we have some notion, for any given piece of

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[28] Cf. Groenendijk, Jeroen and Martin Stokhof. 2005. Why Compositionality? In *Reference and Quantification,* edited by Gregory N. Carlson and Francis Jeffrey Pelletier. Stanford, California: CSLI Publications p.p.83, 86 & 93.
[29] Groenendijk *et al.* p. 85.
[30] Groenendijk *et al.* p. 84.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid. p. 91.

vocabulary, to what extent it has been functionalized.[33] In the case of an ancient language, we are on less sure grounds in the matter. Further, as we shall see, changes akin to functionalization overtake other non-functional vocabulary that does not become functionalized, that is, it loses touch with its original lexical certainty; the term *intention* is an example that I will draw on in some detail in Chapter 2.

Compositionality, it is claimed, can account for our capacity, finite as that may be, to introduce infinitely many new sentences, and to understand sentences that we have never heard before:

> 'It allows us to come up with[34] a finite representation of this infinite object (natural language), one that we can consistently assume to be mastered and used by a finite individual'[35].

If we accept this, then formal languages are, of course, compositional. In their case, any novelty, and our ability to understand it, arises from (1) the acceptance of all finite lengths of formulae, and (2) the acceptance of infinitely many substitution instances; the latter can be cast as a kind of pseudo-novelty. Neither, however, applies to novelty in natural conversational discourse. There, by contrast, we produce, and apprehend, genuine novelty within constrained production lengths. Amongst these are our limited neo-cortical capacities[36], the historical practical limits set by our respiratory cycle, and our limited capacity for the apprehension and comprehension of sentences beyond certain lengths. All these can be construed, in general, as short-term memory constraints. But

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[33] Cf. Jennings, R.E. 2007. Language, Logic and the Brain. *International Journal of Cognitive Informatics and Natural Intelligence* Vol.1 No. 1 .p. 66-79 and Jennings, R.E. 2005. The Semantic Illusion. *In Mistakes of Reason*, edited by Kent Peacock and Andrew Irvine. Toronto: University of Toronto Press .p. 296-320.

[34] 'come up with' is a case in point. We know how to use it as an idiom even though it has lost touch with its lexical grounds. How does compositionality help us understand what it means?

[35] Groenendijk *et al.* p. 92.

[36] Cf. Calvin.

compositionality has historically treated natural language like formal language, that is, as though its elements and its resources were static.[37] This is clearly not the case. Virtually every commonplace we utter was, at one time, descended from a novelty. To see that this is so one need only reflect upon the fact that all language users are descended from non-linguistic ancestors. Perhaps the only brakes on linguistic change are the constraints noted above and others akin to them. Beyond that, linguistic novelty seems limited only by what we can get away with in a given circumstance. And, if by composition we mean *the act of* composing, then composition *is* the vehicle of linguistic change. To all intents and purposes, there seems to be no prohibition on suspending or changing compositional practices.

For present purposes, I dare not adopt any notion of compositionality that seems to treat natural language as though it were a formal language, abstracting or averaging out change. There may, of course, be features of language to the study of which this treatment is essential and helpful. There may also be epochs in which change is so slight as to make such abstraction and averaging useful. However, it will become apparent that, from the point of view of this thesis, that treatment is better set aside. Linguistic innovation must figure in any answer to our two central questions. It may not be as serious a matter in the case of the *contemporaneous* question. We may, for general purposes, be able to rely on the methods of compositionality for understanding. However, even then these may not be sufficient when the change involves a change in a compositional rule as, for example, the innovative use of a middle voice as in 'eats like a

[37] Groenendijk *et al.* p.86ff.

meal' and 'the paper reads well', or the adverbial uses of 'good' and 'real' in 'you did real good', or the nominative use of 'him' as in 'him that was over here'.

Any retention of the language of compositionality as a resource in explaining our production and uptake of linguistic innovation would seem to suggest a radical redeployment of the language of compositionality, one that we can usefully treat as a temporal one. It goes without saying that novel speech involves the assembly, or composition, of bits of language that are lying to hand. From the point of view of my thesis, the production of the composed speech, and its success, rely on our own, and other people's, experience of production, and its success or failure, of the previous uses of the elements that make up the novel composition. It also depends on our understanding of the degree of permissible freedom in changing compositional rules. A legacy of our previous experience of language is our having found out, generally speaking, what we can get away with; I venture that almost every time we say something witty, we are saying something at the expense of a compositional rule. In many respects, linguistic novelty, understood this way, can be seen as more akin to music than to logic; something like the novelty of a riff.

Although compositionality, somehow conceived, may be of some use when considering my *contemporaneous* question, the problems I am after, those raised by the *retrospective* question, are, I believe, beyond the capacity of compositionality to help us. Properly stated, compositionality posits a temporal relation between later combinations of vocabular elements and earlier ones, that is, a reliance of the later on the earlier. Its methods suggest that, with sufficient resources, we can recover past understandings of newly introduced language by working out the prevailing set of syntactic and semantic

values of that language, and their relationship to one another, and comparing those to the previous set. The worry, which I have already signalled and which will eventually emerge full-blown, is that the distinction diachronically, or for that matter, synchronically, between the semantic and syntactic values of vocabulary is not a clear one; they can become so blurred, perhaps even dissolving over time as in the case of functionalization, that a temporal comparison will yield only suspect results.

(ii) Intellectual predicament

Pertinent to this discussion is the question of how to distinguish between my two central questions, the *contemporaneous* and the *retrospective.* The notion of *intellectual predicament* may give us a way. By *intellectual predicament,* I mean narrowly all the conditions and resources that affect one's capacity to say something novel, and, it follows, to understand the novel utterances of others. There is obviously a discontinuity of intellectual predicament between each of us. The degree of that discontinuity is presented here as a way of distinguishing between our two questions. In the case of the *contemporaneous* question, the degree is likely minimal between contemporaries of similar interests, capacities and resources. But, of whatever degree the discontinuity, we must nevertheless overcome it both to introduce and to understand novelty. The greater the degree of discontinuity, the longer is the bridge of understanding to be engineered. And each text presents its own geological challenges. The task of recovering an eighteenth or nineteenth century understanding of its texts is challenge enough; the difficulties are worse the more archaic the understanding we should wish to grasp.

It is evident from what I have already said that differences in intellectual predicament, as I construe it, largely reside in differences of language, and more

particularly, I propose, in the comparative expressive adequacy of available languages. To make the point vivid, we can usefully try to separate two constituent features of anyone's intellectual predicament, both arguably present in all generations. On the view taken here, these features co-evolve and are supposed as inseparable in their morphology. The first is the expressive inadequacy of available linguistic resources. The second is the capacity of one's received language to index distinctions. As to the first, W.K.Guthrie saw this very well. In his explanation of Heraclitus' notoriously enigmatic style, he succinctly makes the point that the scientist must create the language of his science:

> [Heraclitus] was struggling, against the limitations of his language, to express something new and different.[38]

We may suppose that the struggle was not merely for novelty, and that there was some specificity that he could not stipulate, or anticipate. Be that as it may, evidently, Heraclitus and others *have* somehow managed to overcome their resources deficit, since novel scientific theories have in fact emerged. Apparent to a startling degree in these theories is the strategy of appropriating, for innovative technical use, non-theoretical vocabulary of everyday speech. This should be expected. After all, on a biological account, any novel response to the expressive inadequacy of received language can only be constructed out of what is given. Such a strategy, of course, pervades even non-scientific language

Here, I should sound a gentle warning. What may sound to our 21st. century ears as surely having been novel to archaic understanding may have been, at that time, a mere

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[38] Guthrie, 1988 p. 441. Guthrie remarks frequently on this theme. For example: '...the content of his thought was itself of a subtlety exceeding that of his contemporaries, so that the language of his time was bound to be inadequate.' p. 413, and, 'The teaching of Heraclitus...could at no time have been easy to express, and in his own day was so novel as to outrun the resources of contemporary language.' p. 439.

variation on a received use. Consider Thales' use of the language of *water*. We do not know to what extent it was novel, or whether or not it had previously acquired some use in folk-explanations of the physical world. If indeed it was novel, then all we can say is that Thales put the language of liquidity at the disposal of people who wanted to speak generally about features of the natural world, and gave some (apparently) brief hints about how it could be deployed. Again, if novel, Thales's introduction of the language of *water* is an example of my general point about the discontinuity of intellectual predicament. We can hazard that, upon their first hearing Thales's theory, the credulity of his contemporaries may have been far less taxed, if it was at all, than that of a 21st century philosophy student upon her first hearing it.

The second feature of intellectual predicament arises from the comparative capacities of languages to index discriminations. Indeed, the history of theoretical innovations can be read as the co-evolution of linguistic indexing of discriminated differences with the development of the corresponding discriminative skills. New theories reflect the latter in their deployment of the former. (As an example, one need only consider the role in the emergence of arithmetic language of the introduction of 0.) As we trace the development of human language from such an early pre-linguistic stage as, say, the evolution of hominin[39] bipedalism, the repertoire of available distinctions increases. Peering through an evolutionary telescope, we may suppose that, even pre-linguistically, discriminative capacities increased indexed by pre-linguistic sequencing differences (as, say, in the making of tools), and the more swiftly with ante-linguistic and early linguistic developments. On such a large evolutionary scale, the development of

[39] The use of *hominin* follows the usage according to which hominin are the hominid ancestors of homo sapiens.

scientific language, and the associated resolving power of mathematics, has come along very late. On a more local scale, each generation of mathematicians has exploited the discriminative capacities of the previous, and has presented the next with a more highly resolved set of discriminations. Even on the largest scale, the rate of acceleration itself increases with an increasing population of available innovators.

By means of its indexing function, language makes discriminations explicit and public, that is, they become available to others. We, of course, make discriminations with our actions that are not necessarily expressed linguistically: the adjustment of a line in a drawing, or of an arrangement of flowers. When discriminations not previously indexed are brought to notice by language, they become not only shared but also consciously shared; they become available to the dialectic. People with common theoretical interests can have theoretical exchanges about the newly available discriminations; they can accept, reject, refine and alter them.

A useful way of distinguishing between received language and novel language is to consider the former as, for all practical purposes, (a) yielding a kind of averaging out of the discriminative capacities of a population of language users, and (b) as being learnt, and accepted, by that population as expressing finite and settled discriminations: for example, an English-speaking child gives in and accepts that that four-legged creature producing milk is a *cow* and not a *dog*. A person able to make finer discriminations than those that the averaging language is able to serve finds herself in an intellectual predicament whereby she needs to execute some bootstrapping work on her received language. That is, she needs to cobble together a novel language that can discriminate items that are not easily discriminable in her received language. Once a theorist adopts a

particular novel language, she makes available, or releases, howsoever locally, a new repertoire of discriminative capabilities; that repertoire represents the language's enhanced expressive power. Eventually, we can predict, later theorists will likely experience that power, in its turn, as inadequate. The person introducing the novel language will probably not foresee many of the discriminations that can, and will, be made with the new release. In the same way, mathematics-based physics will find uses for mathematics not foreseen prior to its introduction into physics.

As an example of what happens if we adopt a kind of language, let us again consider Thales' assumed adoption of the language of *water*. If Thales did indeed adopt the language of *water*, then, depending on his opportunities for observation, the fundamental novelty of his language would have permitted new hydrologically expressible discriminations. At the very least, we know that it permitted the discrimination between three states: liquid, solid and gaseous. But the language of water also permits a much richer set of discriminations having to do with other hydrodynamic properties as well as with the hydrostatic, hydrolytic and hygrological properties of water. We have no way of knowing whether or not Thales or his immediate successors found some hydrolytic application for the new language; we may possibly have lost some ancient hygrological explanatory model. Similar remarks can be made about Anaximenes' appropriation of the language of *aer*. It released the capacity to discriminate between condensation and rarefaction, leading eventually, we know, to a rich array of meteorological discriminations.[40]

[40] Guthrie 1988 p.135.

But the expressive power of the language of *water*, and that of *aer*, on their own, is limited. For example, the language of *water* can yield only a hydrological explanatory model, which would include all the properties of water listed previously; it does not permit us to discriminate any intermediate states between liquid, solid and gaseous. None of the ancients recorded the observation that, as it is cooled, water contracts only until it reaches 4° C, and then, as it becomes colder and passes the freezing point, it begins to expand. If they did observe the phenomenon, then, with only the language of a proto-hydrological model of water at their disposal, they were in no position to explain it. As an aside, it is interesting that Guthrie found himself able to remark as late as 1960 that scientists were still not able to explain the phenomenon.[41] And whilst the language of *water* can give us a notion of the transition between physical states, there are lots of physical phenomena where it can perform little or no explanatory work: for example, it can't explain why birds can fly and humans cannot, or why apples fall from trees. Thus, Thales' introduction of a novel scientific language can be understood as both opening up and limiting available discriminations. We can safely generalize this point to the introduction of any novel scientific language.

The adoption of the language of *water*, or of any novel language used in theory, is structurally not unlike the introduction of a Kuhnian paradigm:

> The success of a paradigm...is at the start largely a promise of success discoverable in selected and still incomplete examples. Normal science consists in the actualization of that promise, an actualisation achieved by extending the knowledge of those facts that the paradigm displays as particularly

[41] Guthrie 1988 p.125.

> revealing...Few people...realize how much mop-up work of this sort a paradigm leaves to be [done].[42]

In the development of physical theory, once a language is adopted as a theoretical resource, there is a commitment to the discriminative capacities that it releases. New discriminations that are discovered strengthen the use of the language; the better the adopted language, the stronger the commitment becomes. What might lead us to abandon it is its incapacity to make discriminations that we want to make. It has to work in general for the phenomena. There would have been hitches if the early Greeks had noticed that water expands just before freezing. This point is reminiscent to some extent of Kuhn's notion of anomalies leading to scientific revolutions.[43]

The notion of discriminative capacity usefully illuminates one of our difficulties in recovering archaic understanding. To do so effectively would require us to excise our current discriminations, and, by carefully peeling away intervening discriminations, lay bare the discriminations that were available to the ancients.

In discussing two of what I can only suppose are many other constituents of intellectual predicament, I have hopefully shown that the received language that we use in our theories is a legacy of millennia of individual and collective intellectual predicaments. On the one hand, it is a record of responses to conditions of inadequate linguistic resources, on another it is a record of the expressive power released by the language chosen in response to those conditions, and, on yet another, a record of the gradual refinement in linguistic discriminative capacities. Combined they compound our difficulties in recovering archaic understanding, making them, to all intents and purposes,

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[42] Kuhn, Thomas S. 1965. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press p.23ff.
[43] Ibid p.52ff.

practically insuperable. Indeed, the complexity of the record is a feature of our current intellectual predicament. We don't know that we share this feature with the ancients, but we can imagine it as continuous with their intellectual predicament, although, presumably for them perhaps, a less self-conscious one.

I must now admit that, as a resource, the concept of *intellectual predicament* does not yield a reliable method for answering my *retrospective* question. Rather, it suggests that there is no such method; that we will never get at archaic understanding. However, rather than forsake the project, we can at least investigate the difficulties that stall us. In so doing, I will not aspire to overcome those difficulties and, thus, recover archaic understandings, or settle present difficulties. Quite the contrary, since my chosen method suggests that those difficulties can never be overcome. Nor do I aspire to construct an explanatory model of *difficulty* since, with due regard to George Steiner, I still don't have much of an idea of what that would look like. Along the way, I may discover what might be some reasonable candidates for the criteria of adequacy of a useful model. I may also discover some of the resources available to us to understand these difficulties. Undoubtedly, there are such ways, and I may stumble upon them. However, my principal purpose is more modest. We have to be as conscious of our incapacities as our capacities in any intellectual investigation. For me, this is an exercise in cultivating a useful understanding of our incapacities. I simply want to understand intellectual difficulty in order to take account of it.

Section 4: Some Biological Considerations

I have so far spoken of language as if we know what it is. This is far from clear. Such lack of certainty presents my thesis with a metalogical difficulty. I have chosen to come to the study of language from a relatively new approach. Using a biological framework, the best I can do is to suppose that language is a species of what is more generally called *articulative* or *sequencing* activities. As with other sequencing activities, it is capable of virtually infinite adjustments and of the cultivation of finer and finer discriminations. I can also suppose that it is part of a network of other human sequencing activities, both physiological and social. Changes in any one of these activities cannot help but have an effect on other parts of the network. Thus, I can further suppose that linguistic discriminations have co-evolved with physiological and social discriminations, and correspond to human needs that are not exclusively communicative. On these suppositions, any attempt to draw the boundaries of language, either diachronically or synchronically, will have its own set of difficulties.

I take it to be the reasonable supposition that our capacity to make linguistic discriminations and our capacity to make social discriminations have co-evolved out of an ancestral capacity to make physical discriminations: that is, successive micro-stages of development in the one influence immediately succeeding micro-stages in the development of the other. As a structural illustration, let us consider the social activity of tool making. This can be thought of as an early species of acquired physiological discrimination. The toolmaker would have needed to discriminate between the effects produced by the different angles at which, and the different force with which, he struck at a piece of flint. Tool making thus relied on a capacity to make discriminations. Any novel

tool would have been a discriminative exploitation of the incidental effect of a change, accidental or deliberate, in the character of the ballistic motion. In transmitting these discriminations to the next generation, a smallish community would have engendered a common standard of discrimination.

We can tell a similar story about human linguistic production since it too is evidently a species of physical discrimination. Crudely put, when we use language, whether spoken, signed or written, we physically hear and/or see and/or touch physical phenomena. Most obviously we discriminate between what we say and what we might have said but did not. When speech is produced, it has observable, physical effects on the physical circumstances, both linguistic and non-linguistic, of its use. These effects certainly occasion neuro-physiological responses in both the speaker and in the hearer, some of which give rise to a conversational response, and/or other human physical actions and/or changes in the properties and relations of non-organic objects ('please pass the salt', if all goes well, will result in a change in the location of the salt shaker). The non-linguistic features of the physical circumstances also produce neuro-physiological effects, so we can say that the production of speech is a physical intervention in a physical situation, that is, its effects operate upon the effects of other features of that situation, including the effects of other linguistic features. Clearly, our ability to use language relies on our capacity to make physical discriminations.

Our ability to understand a novel word, or the novel use of a received word, can be thought of as relying on our capacity to make linguistic discriminations. Succeeding uses of any linguistic innovation are abstracted from the original circumstance of its use. Like the playful imitative physiological discriminations of the child mimic, any

innovation is disarmed of some of its original effects. Eventually, we can suppose, formerly novel linguistic discriminations may become cued responses; the triggering device may be a linguistic production such as a particular word, phrase or prosody, or it may be a physical motion such as a gesture, or it may be a social setting of such a kind that certain words and tones are selected; whatever it is, it will be a complex of many physical conversational features.

Whatever the successive effects of a linguistic innovation, they will be different from the original; indeed, we can think of its original effects as being discontinued since descendant language users, at different periods, will need to sort out a set of effects unknown to some previous users and, certainly, unknown to the original users. As we shall see, this phenomenon of the discontinuity of effects presents a powerful barrier to recovering earlier understandings, most evidently, of course, in the case of extinct languages.

Section 5: What Is Theoretical Language?

Defining 'theoretical language' compounds the difficulties of defining language more generally. Saying what it is *not* presents less difficulty. It is not some wholly abstract language disjoint from the language of conversation. We can, however, say that, as a consequence of intellectual predicament, theories sometimes introduce non-observational, or non-literal, vocabulary to explain observations. Thus, we can have little difficulty in supposing that, with his hydrological theory of the world, Thales appropriated the language of *water* for a novel and non-observational, or even figurative, use. Typically, the propositions carried by the vocabulary of a theory can be falsified by observation, but cannot be observationally verified. Although the non-observational

vocabulary is necessarily taken from natural language, it cannot, because of the facts of language change, be taken for granted.

Perhaps the most helpful remark that I can make about the vocabulary of theories is that it has something in common with the functionalized vocabulary of ordinary speech. There may be room here for the emergence of a novel mega-word, 'theoreticalization' to go along with 'functionalization' and 'grammaticalization'. Like functionalization, the theoreticalization of a term creates difficulties. One such difficulty is that its introduction critically involves new discriminative capacities, the possession of which may be linked to emerging social discriminations. Another is that it is difficult to treat such new uses informatively by reference to meanings.

We cannot assume that a theoretical use of a term remains the product of some single person's stipulation; once it is introduced, successive populations of users can change its use. Theoretical language, like functional language, *emerges*. The case histories of *cause* and *logos,* as given in Chapter 4, are two illustrations One consequence of the protracted character of this emergence, as distinct from stipulation, is that the use of theoretical terms loses even the minimal assurance of continuity that we have with, using English examples, the terms, 'dog' and 'cat'. Without an assurance of the continuity of use of its terms, the philosophical enterprise can only be a cautionary one.

By way of a final introductory comment on my approach to philosophical difficulty, the view that the language of science has emerged, that it is not given but has been cobbled out of what *is* given, that is, out of non-scientific language, commits us to two consequences. First, it contrasts with the view that treats scientific inquiry as though the language of the inquiry were supplied by some authority independent of the inquirer.

On that view, physical inquiry consists in going out into the world and assigning truth-values to some set of independently provided sentences of the language. The second consequence is that it takes for granted that whatever general strategies for innovative language are available to present-day scientists were available to, and exploited by, early Greek scientists and their intellectual predecessors and descendants.

Section 6: Between Two Myths

Preamble

This section offers a review of some other approaches that have been applied to the task of recovering archaic understanding. Aristotle's account of pre-Aristotelian Greek philosophical thought in Book One of the *Metaphysics* bears witness that efforts to recover ancient Greek understanding have been in play for over two millennia. It is also evidence of the enduring nature of the difficulties that we presently face in those recovery efforts. What is particularly evident is Aristotle's reluctance to give up the theoretical vocabulary of his own architectonic. Such an attachment is not unusual amongst intellectuals of any discipline. Indeed, Aristotle himself remarked, as have several of his commentators since, that this attachment shaped his purpose, and determined his method, in undertaking the historical account. [44] As Guthrie's sums Aristotle's attitude:

> All, from convinced theists to misguided materialists, had something to contribute, once purged of their faults, whether of substance or expression. The task of detecting it he approached with confidence, knowing that he brought to it the elements of a scientific logic applicable to 'any proposed subject'.[45]

And this comment on Book One of the *Metaphysics* from A.E. Taylor:

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[44] Taylor p.79.
[45] Guthrie, W.K.C. 1981. *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol VI.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press p.96.

> Its purpose is not to give a full account of the "systems" of previous thinkers, but to afford presumption that the Aristotelian classification of causes and principles is [complete].[46]

Thus, when taking note of Aristotle's critical understanding of the early Greeks in our own recovery efforts, we must be wary that it is cast in a language that, precisely because he had minted it, his predecessors could not have possessed. The tendency of Greek commentators over the centuries to understand Greek thought in the idiom of their time is summed succinctly by George Boas. Referring to an unnamed symposium organizer whom we can suppose is Boas himself, he makes the following remarks:

> [he] discovered that what The Greeks thought and felt depended to a large extent upon whom one was reading. If one read Cicero one got one idea of The Greeks; if one read Tertullian, one got another. Saint Jerome did not seem to agree with Justin Martyr and Benjamin Jowett certainly did not agree with Jane Harrison. The Greeks then seemed to be a function, to some extent, of the time and place of the person writing about them.[47]

Although not framed as such, recent attempts to recover archaic understanding handle the intellectual predicament of antiquity in a variety of ways. It is not fanciful to imagine that, on first reading the standard texts, a student new to the study of ancient philosophy gains the impression that two myths compete for her allegiance: one of them might be called, *the myth of ancient wisdom,* the other, *the myth of ancient silliness.* This may even be a common response that mature professional philosophers only eventually discard. We can suppose that such responses have their roots in perplexity, in the difficulty of understanding what ancient Greek philosophers were thinking. Guthrie recalls his own early encounters with the works of the pre-Socratics:

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[46] Taylor p.31.
[47] Boas, George. 1939. The Greek Tradition. In *Parnassus* Vol. 11, No. 4 p. 24.

> Reading the remains of the Presocratics...one enjoyed the attempt to penetrate their strange ways of thinking, but strange in many respects their mentalities [remained].[48]

The two myths are used here as an expository device, and as a way of situating my approach towards the study of the ancients. I am not suggesting that the authors cited are proponents of, or 'have fallen for', the myths. Nor am I suggesting that the myths are abroad amongst professional scholars of ancient philosophy. I am merely pointing out that a myth of common understanding can arise from the kind of remarks that I give in evidence, and that the manner in which the thought of the ancients is elevated or trivialized can perpetuate that myth for the unguided student. Further, the selected citations illustrate the tendency to express one's critical understanding of past authors in one's own expressive idiom, and within one's own ideology. This, also, can mislead the innocent.

(i) The myth of ancient wisdom

We can sum this myth as follows: ancient thinkers were granted a clearer, simpler, more universal understanding of the world and of the place of humanity in it than we have been If we could but unlock the secrets of their understanding, we could share their universal vision. The supposition is confirmed by the simplicity of the language of the fragments: even if one doesn't quite get it, the insights whose meanings one is pondering are easy to remember. The trust is soon vindicated, for Heraclitus emerges in some commentators' work as an earlier Einstein, and the atomists as earlier Rutherfords.[49]At any rate they had the ideas thousands of years before anyone was to be given credit for them. True enough that they didn't work out the details: they were in no position to do so,

[48] Cf. Guthrie 1988 p. 2 & 1962, p.403.
[49] For an example see Sambursky, S.1959. *Physics of the Stoics.* London. Routledge and Kegan Paul p.56

but they made remarkable progress, and if only they had been believed, where might science be? In the moral sphere particularly, such a reader strikes pay dirt. The forces of love and hate are evident in every aspect of domestic, civic, political and international life. Love brings families, communities, and countries into productive and fulfilling unions, whereas hatred tears them apart. One's friends are allied with the force of love and one's enemies with the force of hatred. The early moralists were also expected to be accomplished mathematicians and scientists. So their moral and natural musings combine to yield a single unified vision, and lofty ideals as well. Witness Plato's doctrines about the *Form of the Good*:

> Then what gives the objects of knowledge their truth and the mind the power of knowing is the Form of the Good. It is the cause of knowledge and truth, and you will be right to think of it as being itself known, and yet as being something other than, and even higher then, knowledge and truth.[50]

Such a conception of ancient philosophy is essentially romantic. In post-Kantian British philosophical writings, as here in Coleridge's deference to Plato, we find its loftiest expression:

> I have thus assigned the first place in the science of method to law; and first of the first, to law, as the absolute kind ... I contemplate it as exclusively an attribute of the Supreme Being, inseparable from the idea of God; adding, however, that from the contemplation of law in this perfect form, must be derived all true insight into all other grounds and principles necessary to method, as the science common to all sciences ... Alienated from this intuition or steadfast faith, ingenious men may produce schemes conducive to the peculiar purposes of particular sciences, but no scientific system.[51]

Some twentieth-century philosophers have preserved the lofty tone. Heidegger rhapsodizes:

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[50] Plato. 1966. *The Republic*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin p.273.
[51] Richards, I.A., ed. 1977. *The Portable Coleridge*. Harmondsworth: Penguin p.350.

> [the] distinctive character of modern knowing [*Wissens*] consists in the decisive working out of a tendency that still remains hidden in the essence of knowing as the Greeks experienced it, and that precisely needs the Greek knowing in order to become, over against it, another kind of knowing.[52]

And,

> That which was thought and in poetry was sung at the dawn of Greek antiquity is still present, present in such a way that its essence, which was still hidden from itself, everywhere comes to encounter [us][53]

Speaking of this approach as an 'impulse', Steiner represents the view as follows:

> The ...impulse is...one of reversion, of an attempted return to an archaic past in which language and thought had, somehow, been open to the truth of being, to the hidden sources of all meaning.[54]

And, citing Heidegger:

> [it] is the task of the thinker, of man in his essence, to return to the illuminations of authentic existence reflected in the pre- Socratics.[55]

Such attitudes reflect the tendency for some people to read uncritically their own ideologies into past writings. If, for example, one reads an ancient text as a religious, rather then as a philosophical, work, then there is no need for critical understanding of it beyond that of any other religious work; one can accept on faith that the ancient text is saying something important. Such, we can suppose, would have been the approach of those to whom Boas is referring when he makes a related point:

> There were years when very few of the Dialogues were read, when the *Timaeus*, for instance, was the main source of our information about Platonism. In such periods, Plato became largely a pre-Christian [Christian][56]

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[52] Heidegger, Martin. 1977. Science and Reflection. In *The Question of Technology and Other Essays,* translated by William Lovitt. New York: Harper and Row Publishers p.157.
[53] Ibid p.158.
[54] Steiner 1980 p.43.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Boas p.24.

(ii) The myth of ancient silliness

The charges that promote this myth come variously accoutred, and the authors cited would, and no doubt rightly, repudiate the language of silliness. However, a novice student will likely keep such a language in play when the early Greeks are characterized in the standard texts as whimsical, odd, naïve, vague or defective, as, for example, when Barnes, in delineating certain Milesian features, declares their *vagueness* and *naiveté* as a matter of common agreement:

> [their] (the Milesians') views are incurably vague; and underlying this vagueness is a complete innocence of the delights of measurement and quantification.[57] [58]

When the same student reads in the same text that, '...none of the Milesian theories is true' and finds their efforts referred to as 'failures'[59], she may think that the use of the language of 'silliness' is confirmed. Barnes concedes only that '...they [the Milesians] gave reasons for their opinions, however bizarre those opinions may seem'[60]. In the matter of Anaximander's successive, innumerable worlds, Kirk and Raven had earlier struck a similar tone:

> [their] (the Milesians') explanations were often fanciful and dogmatic, but were none the less attempts to account for observed phenomena[61]

Previously, Zeller had given only qualified praise, couched in the language of oddness, to Anaximenes and his postulation of air as primary substance:

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[57] Barnes, Jonathan. 1986. *The Presocratic Philosophers*. London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul. p .48.

[58] One might as usefully remark that they were averse to the application of the microscope. They could not apply what they had no access to. Nor could they see their deficiency in precision without conceiving of what alone could supply it.

[59] Barnes p.48.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Kirk, G. S. and J.E. Raven. 1962. *The Presocratic Philosophers*. Cambridge: C.U.P. p.122.

> However naïve and extraordinary many views of the three oldest Greek thinkers may seem to us, it marks a powerful, fundamental change from a mythical conception to a natural...explanation of the [world][62]

Guthrie, too, uses this language in his historical overview:

> [even] Aristotle...has some fixed ideas which we encounter with a sense of shock; for example...some curious notions about the primacy of the number [three][63]

At least Kitto grants that Thales' hypothesis was capable of being assigned a truth-value:

> [the] important thing that Thales did was to ask a simple question, and give an incorrect answer.[64]

Without argument, however, he assumes that the question was 'simple'.

Explanations for the 'odd' views of the pre-Socratics vary. Several commentators attribute them to the psychological make-up of the early Greeks:

> "Love" and "Hate" and "Mind" evidence the *reluctance* of (early) philosophers to abandon the interpretation of the cosmos in terms of human feelings and human rationality[65]

And,

> Greek scientists were in general *averse* to...the application of mathematics to physical processes and phenomena.[66]

And, Barnes again:

> [none] of the Milesians *aspired* to the sort of precision we require in a scientific theory.[67]

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[62] Zeller, Eduard. 1963. *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy.* London: Routledge & Kegan p.31.
[63] Guthrie 1988 p.2.
[64] Kitto, H.D.F. 1964. *The Greeks.* Baltimore: Penguin. P.178.
[65] Nahm, Milton C. 1964. *Selections From Early Greek Philosophy.* New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts p.22 *italics mine.*
[66] Barnes p.46 *italics mine.*
[67] Ibid p.48 *italics mine.*

Other commentators suggest that early Greek philosophers were epistemically blinkered by their attachment to dogmatism. Thus, we find Kirk and Raven referring to the:

> [naturally] over-dogmatic tendency of Greek philosophy in its first buoyant stages.[68]

And this, in the same vein, from Zeller:

> Ionic philosophy, in its first representatives, considered from a methodological point of view, is pure dogmatism.[69]

Guthrie suggests that what seems 'merely silly' to some may be a consequence of the Greeks' use of received mythical conceptions in their theoretical explanations.[70]

Attitudes that view the pre-Socratics as somehow naïve, or vague, in their ideas are well within the Aristotelian tradition. Characterizing their pronouncements, on A. E. Taylor's translation, as the, 'lisping speech of an infant' [71], Aristotle refers to his early predecessors as, 'untrained recruits' whose, 'exposition was obscure and confused'.[72] Like Aristotle, many twentieth-century commentators, as cited above, have conceived of the difficulty in recovering previous understandings in their own scientific idiom. With respect to the pre-Socratics, the tendency has been to see the difficulty as symptomatic of some inadequacy within their character: they are given to whimsy or vagueness.

Closer to the nub of the matter is the realization by some commentators that early Greek thinkers lacked an adequately expressive mathematical language[73]:

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[68] Kirk & Raven p.181.
[69] Zeller p.24.
[70] Guthrie 1988 p.1.
[71] Taylor, A.E. 1949. *Aristotle on His Predecessors: Being the First Book of His Metaphysics.* Chicago: Open Court Publishing p.138.
[72] Ibid p.88.
[73] For comment on this point, see Guthrie 1988, p.403 and Sambursky pp. 49, 59, 89.

> [it] is in keeping with the elementary character of Greek mathematics that his (Thales) physics never got beyond its first beginnings.[74]

Guthrie steers us even further away from any notion that the pronouncements of the pre-Socratics were 'silly'. Obliquely making the point that we should look to the nature of language as the source of our difficulty, he frequently, and variously, insists that the lack of an adequately expressive language compels science to create its own language. Thus, speaking of Heraclitus:

> [the] content of his thought was itself of a subtlety exceeding that of his contemporaries, so that the language of his time was bound to be inadequate.[75]

And,

> The teaching of Heraclitus...was so novel as to outrun the resources of contemporary language.[76]

And,

> [he] (Heraclitus) was struggling, against the limitations of his language, to express something new and different.[77]

Speaking of Parmenides, he says:

> [one] cannot read his poem without feeling that he is constantly struggling against the sheer inadequacy of the available language[78]

On the approach that I am advocating, the ancient philosophers were neither wise, as in being mystically endowed, nor silly. Better to introduce them to the new student of philosophy as mortals, indubitably of formidable intellect, each responding to his particularly constituted intellectual predicament, and each, in order to say something

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[74] Zeller p.27.
[75] Guthrie 1988 p.413.
[76] Ibid p.439.
[77] Guthrie 1988. p. 441.
[78] Guthrie, W.K.C. 1969. A *History of Greek Philosophy Vol.II.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press p.73.

novel, needing to create the language of his theory out of what was available to him. Such an approach would, perhaps, add pedagogical value to the study of ancient philosophy beyond an historical interest in its 'strange' doctrines. The problem of intellectual predicament is the problem of deep difficulty. The ancients offer stark illustrations of the inescapability of that difficulty, and of the marks it leaves on our efforts at originality.

CHAPTER 2: SOURCES OF DIFFICULTY

Preamble

I take George Steiner's classification of textual difficulties as a starting point for my investigation of the difficulties involved in the task of recovering archaic understanding. Although Steiner's primary interest is with the task of recovering the understanding of English literary writers, his framework can be applied, at least initially, to the same task with respect to the ancient philosophers. However, I show that the resources that he suggests, and that we typically use for overcoming those difficulties, *viz.* translation and etymology, have their own difficulties. Equally problematic, I propose, is his use of a semantic explanatory account. I suggest that an approach that takes into account the physical facts of language change may offer an alternative explanation of the difficulties.

Section 1: George Steiner's Classification of Difficulties

No explanatory account is better than its fundamental assumptions. Steiner's account reflects the assumptions, and the degree of self-conscious use of language, of what philosophers would regard as a *semantic* account of language in that he uses the language of *meaning* and attributes mental states to language users ('intention' and 'thought', for example) He is not a philosopher and does not write with a philosopher's precision. That being said, even in philosophy there is a set of vocabulary whose use is tolerated without definition. But the range of vocabulary that literary theorists are prepared to accept without definition is much wider than that of philosophers. Steiner's use of terms such as *meaning*, *sense*, *thought* and *intention* do fall within the philosophical argot, but his use

of even that vocabulary does not reflect the discipline of philosophical exchange. What is more, he includes in his account vocabulary that philosophers would regard as florid: 'inmost'[79], 'impenetrability of ...sense[80],'charged with the intent'[81], 'activate a metaphor of separation'[82], and 'energized field of associations',[83] are some examples. Nevertheless, it is helpful to open this chapter with his typology of difficulties because: (a) he describes some textual difficulties, and some methods for overcoming them, that are common to both literature and philosophy and, (b) he presents a contrast case for my own approach. To elaborate on (b): Steiner's approach offers us two kinds of contrast. The first concerns motivation. As a literary theorist, Steiner can succeed in overcoming a textual difficulty without rendering the poem less than poetic or substituting a prosaic and discursive translation for the poem. He characterizes a poem as, 'a language-act most charged with the intent of...reaching out to touch the listener or the reader in his inmost...'[84]. Anything in the text that thwarts this 'reaching out' or the understanding of how that 'reaching-out' is achieved creates poetic difficulty. His overall thrust in figuring out an alien word, or the devices and intentions of the poet, is to enable, and better understand, the aesthetic response. For example, with what he later classifies as a *tactical* difficulty[85], the recognition that the difficulty is a created one helps reveal the poet's intentions, a discovery that is supposed in turn to heighten our literary appreciation. The standard for success is not an understanding of the text as in *full comprehension*, but rather as the *fullest possible aesthetic appreciation*. This contrasts with the aims of the philosopher,

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[79] Steiner 1980 p.18.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid p.21.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid p.33.

although the question has to be asked whether what we as philosophers are after from the Greeks is a reasonable aesthetic response or more discursively accessible content. Any answer would likely depend on whom we asked. Certainly, it would be different coming from a nineteenth century romantic such as Coleridge than it would be coming from any twenty-first century analytical philosopher. The second kind of contrast that Steiner provides for us has to do with his explanatory idiom. I'll say more on that topic later.

We must remind ourselves that the fact that Steiner is concerned with difficulty in poetry does not detract from the philosophical utility of his findings. Much of philosophy has been written in an undeniable literary idiom, relying on literary effect for understanding. Consider Sartre's

> Possession is a magical relation; I am these objects which I possess, but outside, so to speak, facing myself...what I possess is mine outside of me, outside all subjectivity, as an in-itself which escapes me at each instant, and whose creation at each instant I perpetuate[86]

Surely, anyone would be forgiven for not reading this as anything other than poetry?

(i) Steiner's project

Steiner characterizes his proposed classification of difficulties as a first step in what he calls the, '*desiderata* of a theory of difficulty'.[87] At the outset, he remarks that any such theory must be about language in general.[88] However, he does not then move to mine the facts of language as a resource for investigating difficulty. As he sees it, any explanation to be found in language is irretrievable without a complete and non-controversial model of the relations between thought and speech, and outside a non-controversial

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[86] Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1984.*Being and Nothingness.* Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press. p. 775.
[87] Steiner 1980. p. 19.
[88] Ibid. p. 18.

epistemology.[89] These, of course, as he acknowledges, are not available to him[90], or to us for that matter. Rather, to get started on theory building, he narrows the definition of difficulty to 'inability to understand'[91], that is, there is a breakdown in intelligibility between the written/spoken words and their audience. He clarifies that the audience does not understand what the words *mean* or their authors *intend*. He places the responsibility for the breakdown squarely within the language user's semantic competencies. Thus, even when later discussing the kind of difficulty created by poets when they deliberately coin new words or introduce obscure phrases, Steiner implies that the reader can eventually sort it out with the right kind of effort and resources. He offers as further clarification that, when using the phrase 'inability to understand', he is not referring to conceptual difficulty, that is, difficulty in grasping an idea (although he admits that he is not clear what we mean when we use these terms). As to what he is referring to, he clarifies, somewhat vaguely, that it is a difficulty that:

> [does] not carry the same weight, that does not have the same bearing, it would if we said 'this argument in Immanuel Kant...We may be aiming at something far less inherent or 'substantive'— a slippery term where language is concerned — than concept.[92]

Steiner points out, and rightly on his approach, that a poetry reader can encounter different types of difficulties. He sets himself the task of classifying them. As a preliminary step, he isolates four distinct types: contingent, modal, tactical and ontological.[93]

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[89] Steiner 1980. p. 18.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid p.19.
[93] Ibid.

(ii) Contingent difficulties[94]

Contingent difficulties arise when a word and/or phrase is unintelligible to us. We have to resort to reference materials and, in Steiner's words, 'look up'[95] the items causing the difficulty. He believes that most of our difficulties in poetry are of this sort. With ample illustration, he recounts words and expressions that are difficult because they are archaic, technical, arcane, or form part of a dialect, a slang, an argot, or a taboo. He accuses the poets themselves of adding to our difficulties. Citing Mandelstam, Tennyson and Mallarmé, he shows that poets can be, 'recombination wordsmiths', 'passionate resuscitators of buried and spectral words', and pursuers of 'le mot rare'.[96]

Beyond the words and phrases themselves, there are, he points out, their contextual features that we may need to look up. He describes poetic discourse as follows:

> An energized field of association and connotation, of overtones and undertones, of rebus and homophone, surround its motion, and break from it in the context of collision (words speak not only to the ear but also to the eye, and even to the touch. Multiplicity of meaning, 'enclosedness', are the rule rather than the exception[97]

Thus, mythologies, allegories, parables, the themes and figures of earlier poetry reaching back to Homer, past cosmic systems and beliefs, these may all require research in order to overcome a *contingent* difficulty. Pressing the point, he claims that the 'whole ambient culture'[98] is a poem's context. By this, we can suppose him to mean that poetry is maximally indexical: that is, it exploits the totality of what can be exploited in its

[94]Summarizes Steiner 1980 pp. 19-27.
[95] Ibid. p. 19.
[96] Ibid. p. 20.
[97] Ibid. p. 21.
[98] Ibid. p. 27.

surroundings. Here, I stray from the standard philosophical usage of the notion of indexicality as cited in the on-line *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

> Indexicals are linguistic expressions whose reference shifts from utterance to utterance. 'I', 'here', 'now', 'he', 'she', and 'that' are classic examples of indexicals.[99]

Another way of looking at indexicality is this: indexicals render verbal specifications unnecessary. If efficiency is one of the aims of speech production, as we suppose it is of any biological entity, then maximum indexicality is likely one of its goals. As Steiner himself recognises, the point is a general one about language use, and not peculiar to poetry, 'the issue is philosophically vital: a language-act is inexhaustible to interpretation precisely because its context is the world'.[100] From this, can we also take him to mean that no sentence can be semantically saturated since there are indefinite ways of making it true? Probably not since he next claims that difficulties of this sort are ultimately resolvable, perhaps not practically in one life span, but theoretically:

> [there] is somewhere a lexicon, a concordance, a manual of stars, a *florilegium*, a pandect of medicine, which will resolve the difficulty...In the total library, on the *collectanea* and *summa summarum* of all things, I can...find that a *ptyx* is a conch.[101]

Although not stated, we can assume that Steiner would add: resolvable to a degree that it preserves the essentially poetic character of the work. With such a claim, he seems to be making the pragmatic point that, theoretically, a sentence can be semantically saturated because what goes on in the world makes it unnecessary to specify certain kinds of references linguistically.

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[99] Braun, David. 2001. Indexicals. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2001 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2001/entries/indexicals/>accessed January 27, 2007.
[100] Steiner 1980. p. 26.
[101] Ibid. p.27.

(iii) Modal difficulties[102]

According to Steiner, we experience modal difficulties when we understand but fail to comprehend a text because of our perceptual and sensible distance from the past We 'get' the lexical content but it fails to engage us, it does not resonate. In Steiner's words, the 'idiom and order of apprehension are no longer natural to us'[103]:

> The tone, the manifest subject of the poem are such that we fail to see a justification for poetic form, that the root-occasion of the poem's composition eludes or repels our internalized sense of what poetry should or should not be about, of what are the intelligible, morally and aesthetically acceptable moments and motives for poetry.[104]

He illustrates with lines from Lovelace's, *La Bella Roba:*

> I cannot tell who loves the Skeleton
> Of a poor Marmoset, nought but boan, boan
> Give me a nakedness with her cloath's on...
> Sure it is meant good Husbandry in men,
> Who do incorporate with Aëry leane,
> T'repair their sides, and get their Ribb agen[105]

And asks:

> At what remove do we post ourselves and our reading from a style of language and a climate of consciousness in which venery and transubstantiation mesh?[106]

Steiner does not offer a way of overcoming this difficulty; there are no answers to be 'looked up'. We can, he suggests, learn at the cerebral level about the dynamics of past sensibilities, but "...we cannot coerce our own sensibility into the relevant form of perception".[107]

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[102] Steiner 1980. p. 27-33.
[103] Ibid. p. 33.
[104] Ibid. p. 28.
[105] Ibid. p. 29ff.
[106] Ibid. p. 32.
[107] Ibid. p. 33.

(iv) Tactical difficulties[108]

Tactical difficulties, as Steiner understands them, are those created purposefully by the poet .She may rely on obscurity in order to produce certain stylistic effects; there may be political and/or personal circumstances that warrant obliquity. But there is also what Steiner describes as a 'poetic of tactical difficulty'[109]. Here, he is referring to the poet's desire to revitalize, to make new, his given language, Mallarmé's 'words of the tribe', whose, "...similes are stock, its metaphors worn down to cliché."[110]

> The authentic poet cannot make do with the infinitely shop-worn inventory of speech, with the necessarily devalued or counterfeit currency of the every-day.[111]

Steiner catalogues the tactical strategies of the poet whose aim can vary from wanting to produce momentary shock to creating 'bewildering obscurity'[112]:

> He must literally create new words and syntactic modes[113]...He will reanimate lexical and grammatical resources...He will melt and inflect words into neo-logical shapes...He will...undermine...the banal and constricting discriminations of ordinary, public syntax.[114]

Steiner also alludes to the insoluble contradiction between private meaning[115] and public access, one that '...finds its creative expression in tactical difficulties'[116]. We are not meant to understand easily, and sometimes, any understanding that we do gain 'remains provisional'[117]. We can again ask: what level of understanding is Steiner invoking? Certainly, there are instances where the poet creates a tactical difficulty for prosaic understanding precisely because there is no such understanding to be had. Witness Dylan

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[108]. Steiner 1980 pp.33-40
[109]Ibid. p. 34.
[110] Ibid. p. 34.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid. p. 35.
[113] Ibid. p.34.
[114] Ibid. p. 35.
[115] By which I take him to mean something like 'idiolect' rather than anything Wittgensteinian.
[116] Steiner 1980. p. 35.
[117] Ibid.

Thomas's, 'With the man in the wind and the west moon'[118]. An aesthetic understanding is easily gained, but there is no prosaic content to be grasped.

(v) Ontological difficulties[119]

Ontological difficulties occur in poetry that confronts not only its own status and significance, but also those of language itself. Steiner observes that such difficulties arose as a poetic phenomenon in the industrialized world of the nineteenth century, and persisted, with the deconstructionists, well into the twentieth. He cites as examples the French poets Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé, and later, Celan and Derrida. In such poetry, he explains, the contract of intelligibility between poet and reader is broken, but we still know that it is poetry, and not nonsense. Further, the poet does not call upon us to read his poem; rather, we are invited to bear witness to '...its precarious possibility of existence in an 'open' space of collisions, of momentary fusions between word and referent'[120]. The poet is no longer the author, but the receptor. Steiner recognizes two impulses at play with this difficulty: one is a rejection of a past that is seen as burdensome (he references Mallarmé); the other is a longing for the past, for the 'primal mystery of magic'[121] (he cites Gerard Manley Hopkins, Heidegger and Holderlin). How can we be assured that what is produced is a poem? Steiner, regrettably, but understandably, gives no answer, although insisting that some answer is urgently needed. He wonders whether the phenomenon is transitory, or represents a break, in the, '[classic] contract between word and world'[122].

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[118] Thomas, Dylan. 1966. *Collected Poems 1934-1952* London: J. M. Dent & Sons. . p.62.
[119] Steiner 1980. p. 40-47.
[120] Ibid. p. 46.
[121] Ibid p.43.
[122] Steiner 1980. p 47.

(vi) Steiner's typology and philosophy

Clearly, in many ways, Steiner's typology can be applied without modification to philosophy texts. Philosophical tyros, like novice medical students, must have recourse to dictionaries, must learn alien idioms and distinctions that are not perfectly clear even to their teachers. The ancient Greek notion of *justice* as allotment and inalterable fate[123] presents us with a *modal difficulty*; it does not resonate with our post-Enlightenment and Rawlsian[124] liberal notions of fairness, rights, equality and freedom, let alone with those of students fresh out of high school who have heard of neither Greek *justice* nor Rawlsian *political liberalism* A few lines into Hegel and we are awash in what we might feel must be *tactical difficulties*, as Steiner understood them: anyone would be forgiven her perplexity on first encountering:

> That the truth is only realized in the form of system, that substance is essentially subject, is expressed in the idea which represents the Absolute as Spirit (*Geist*) - the grandest conception of all, and one which is due to modern times and its religion. Spirit is alone Reality. It is the inner being of the world, that which essentially is, and is per se; it assumes objective, determinate form, and enters into relations with itself-it is externality (otherness), and exists for [self].[125]

And how are we to understand the *ontological difficulty* posed by the apparent rejection of philosophy by Nietzsche when he asks:

> Suppose we want truth: *why not rather* untruth? And uncertainty? Even ignorance?[126]

But, alas, no matter how generalisable to philosophy, Steiner's admittedly 'rough and

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[123] See chapter 3 of this thesis.
[124] Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
[125] Hegel, G.W.F. 1966. *The Phenomenology of Mind*, translated by J.B.Baillie. 2nd.Edition.London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. P.85ff.
[126] Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1989. *Beyond Good & Evil*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books. p. 9.

preliminary' classification[127] stands only at the threshold of our difficulties in understanding the texts of both poets and philosophers alike. In our attempts to overcome contingent, modal, tactical and ontological difficulties, we encounter, as we shall see, many more difficulties.

Section 2: Difficulties in Overcoming Difficulty

As the novice philosopher soon discovers, flights to the dictionary are rewarded by a further difficulty–there can be no guarantee that she can trust what she finds there. Why not? Because what she finds is the produce of those moiling in the fields of lexicography, translation and etymology, and not of philosophy. The quality of the roots harvested by these labourers is, for a number of well-documented reasons[128], notoriously, and self-confessedly, unreliable. A few of these reasons will make the point.

(i) Lexicography

First, on a broad point, most of the standard references on which we must rely have been compiled by lexicographers. This is problematic since we have no way of knowing whether, when choosing an account of a word, they were asking questions that are theoretically useful for us. Nor do we know whether they were expert enough in one's own area of work to understand the questions as one does oneself. This, presumably, is a problem that all disciplines face. After all, the lexicographer is an expert only in her own field, and has only a lexicographer's understanding of the vocabulary. For my purposes, we may usefully use their work as sources of raw data, but not as sources of understanding the data. Consider the Latin *aut* We can ask a classicist lexicographer

[127] Steiner 1980. p. 47.
[128] For a fuller discussion of the problems, cf. Steiner, 1977.p 1-48. Also, cf. Palmer, Leonard R. 1972. *Descriptive and Comparative Linguistics.* London: Faber & Faber.

whether or not Latin has an exclusive 'or' connective, and, citing *aut* she will likely respond that it has. If you then ask her whether or not she is acquainted with the truth table for *xor,* she will probably say no, thus revealing an impoverished understanding of the first question. Much the same can be said of people who think that there's an exclusive 'or' in English; in general they do not understand what they're claiming. The following examples are illustrative of the classicist's understanding of *aut.* In Cassell's Latin/English Dictionary, we find:

> *Aut:* generally, unlike *vel,* introducing a second alternative that positively excludes the first [129]

Well, that's right up until a verb is introduced, but any notion of exclusivity remaining at that point can completely vanish. As Jennings comments, illustrating with text from Cicero:

> [in] *tribunos aut plebem* the magistrates and the mob are contrasted, and certainly exclude one another. But once a verb is added, as in *tribunos aut plebem timebat* (feared the magistrates or the mob), the resulting predicate is not exclusive at all; clearly fearing the magistrates does not exclude fearing the mob.[130]

Lewis and Short, in differentiating between *aut* and *vel,* state that *aut* is objective and *vel* is subjective with *aut* excluding one term and *vel* making the two indifferent.[131] We can suppose that by 'objective' they mean that *aut* represents alternates in the world and, by 'subjective', *vel* represents alternatives of choice If they are correct, the use of *aut* as such does not imply exclusivity.

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[129] Mardant, Rev. J.R. V. and Joseph F. Charles (eds.). 1931. *Cassell's Latin/English Dictionary.* London: Cassell *aut sv*

[130] Jennings, R.E. 1994. *The Genealogy of Disjunction.* New York: Oxford University Press p. 241 ff. (*Brackets mine*).

[131] Lewis, Charlton T. and Charles Short. 1962. A *Latin Dictionary.* Oxford: Clarendon Press *aut sv.*

Even on their own understanding of the relevant vocabulary, we have no reason to think that lexicographers give correct accounts. Rather, it would seem prudent to suppose that, over time, errors, misreadings, and biased accounts have been introduced into the lexical record. Unavoidably, these would have been bequeathed to successive generations of lexicographers and their readers. Clearly, at such a large temporal remove, this feature alone greatly compounds the difficulties of our task in recovering archaic understandings. Consider the English the preposition *in* as a translation of the Greek ἐν, where *in* is given a non-instrumental use as in 'baptism in water'. This has led in some quarters to the practice of baptism by immersion. Elsewhere, ἐν is understood as instrumental as in *with* and *by*: for example, *en machioê* (approximately *by the sword*)[132]; selecting 'in' rather than 'by' could have led to the difference in practice, say, between dipping and sprinkling. Hence at the least, it would be prudent to suspect some of our inherited translations, not only at their origin, but also in their substance.

(ii) Translation

As I understand it, the requirements for choosing a translation are unspecified. This is a first concern. Another is that whatever word a translator uses in the receptor language will have a markedly different history from that of the word that is being translated, and, significantly, a different set of connectivities and literal associations. I will discuss the example of the English *responsibility* as a translation of the Greek *aitia* in some detail in Chapter 4.[133] Also, we know that, in the English language at least, translations of many classical terms were English transliterations of Latin words, and were not pre-existing

[132] *Greek New Testament on-line. Revelations Ch. 13 v 10* http://www-users.cs.york.ac.uk/~fisher/cgi-bin/gnt?id=2713 accessed February 05, 2007.

[133] Using a language yet to be introduced, that of a *semantic field,* I explain that a word used as a translation may have a semantic field that is nothing like the semantic field of the word that it is translating.

words in the English language: *cause* for example. Some English words are transliterations of Latin words that were Latin transliterations of Greek words, as with *metaphor*. English transliterations naturally have acquired their own uses and histories peculiar to English. Let's consider in more detail the example of *metaphor*. Appropriated by Aristotle from its everyday Greek use to denote *transference*, he appropriated it to characterize a class of linguistic transferential phenomena that included, but was not exhausted by, a figurative use of a word. If it were exhausted by it, it would hardly be an explanation. It was later transliterated by the Romans to denote a category of figurative speech, or trope, within their system of rhetoric. As such, it became an object for study; its properties were investigated and eventually broken down into sub-categories: metonym, synecdote and so on. Centuries later, it was transliterated, along with its formalized sub-categories, into English as part and parcel of the adoption of Rhetoric as a formal discipline. Needless to say, in our efforts to understand Aristotle's use of *metaphor*, we should assume that he was innocent of the particularizing limitations to its use that it underwent in later hands.

An equally cautionary note should be struck when using *confused supposition* to describe an item of medieval logic. It would be a misguided novice student of medieval logic who would assume that the term 'confused', an English transliteration of the past participle of the Latin verb *confundere* denoted for a medieval Latin reader a use having to do with lack of clarity or with being disoriented. Rather, that reader would have understood it as being suggestive of a uniting, or melting together, with a consequent loss of the references to particulars. Lewis and Short provide instances of two general uses of

confundere: *to unite/combine*, and *to bring into disorder*.[134] The former would seem the correct reading of statements such as:

> Dico quod maioris virtutis est signum distributivum in confundendo quam signum particulare determinando[135]
>
> (*The distributive sign has greater power to confer confused supposition than the sign of particularity has to confer determinate supposition*[136])

A further worry is that translators are sometimes seduced by false friends. Steiner gives us this example of a homonym: the English *habit* and the French *habit*.[137] We can add the English *medium* and the French *médium*. Steiner also instances what he refers to as 'mutually untranslatable cognates', such as the English *home* and the German *heim*.[138] What can be equally seductive is the lazy assumption that a current term that has been present in a language for a lengthy period of time has the same usage as it had, say, twenty, fifty, a hundred, five hundred years ago. It is almost certain that our present understanding of words that were chosen by eighteenth-century English translators to translate key Hellenic philosophical terms is at several removes from the understanding of those translators. There is no reason to suppose otherwise. We have enough difficulty with eighteenth-century English vocabulary that was not offered as translations of Greek. Consider the term *without*. In his detailed account of its logicalization, Jennings alerts us to the temptation to misread Berkeley's, 'A very violent and painful heat cannot exist without the mind', as *lacking* rather than as *outside*.[139] The term *lust* offers us another

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[134] Lewis *confundere sv*.
[135] Cited in Broadie, Alexander. 1985. *The Circle of John Mair*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press Broadie p.54.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Steiner 1977. p. 28.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Cf. Jennings, R.E. 2004. The Meaning of Connectives. In *Semantics: A Reader,* edited by Steven Davis and Brendan Gillon. New York: Oxford University Press p.674.

example. Surely, we must set aside any notion of carnality, or reprobation, when we read Sterne's:

> I have lusted earnestly, and endeavoured carefully...that these little books...might stand instead of many bigger books'.[140]

Hume's use of *individual* is another instance where care must be taken in its reading. Our understanding of it as denoting an entity distinguishable from others of its kind seems to be in play for him. For example:

> [and] they discovered a pretense at least, for this unity of principle in that close union of interest, which is so observable between the public and each individual.[141]

But so does its earlier use as 'indivisible' and 'inseparable':

> For as this idea arises from a number of similar instances, and not from any single instance, it must arise from that circumstance, in which the number of instances differ from every individual instance.[142]

Clearly, such was Milton's use:

> This untheologicall Remonstrant would divide the individuall Catholicke Church into severall Republicks.[143]

I must grant, however, that, even though we have a record of a Miltonian use of *individual* that we have since lost, but one which we can suppose was familiar to Hume, we have no way of knowing with any certainty whether Hume was using the term in the first instance any differently from the second, nor whether the distinction was relevant to him, nor whether it was beneath the specificity of his intentions. Nonetheless, the least

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[140] Simpson, J.A. and E.S.C. Weiner, (eds.). 1989. The *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd. Edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Vol. IX *individual sv.*
[141] Hendel, Charles W. (ed.) 1957. *David Hume: An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals.* Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company p. 46.
[142] Beauchamp. Tom. (ed.) 1999. *David Hume: An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.147.
[143] *OED individual sv.*

we can do in resisting temporal false friends is to recognise their possibility, and to tread warily.

We must be on the watch also for the very human tendency to interpret word use of the past in terms of current, or preferred, interpretive and ontological frameworks, a tendency that, as Guthrie notes, was indulged by Aristotle and by the Stoics in their respective readings of Heraclitus.[144] Even if reading in our first language, we cannot assume that the author shares our philosophical framework, or our idiom. There is yet another worry to which we must be alert, particularly when reading translations of classical texts: the possibility that the translator has made two erroneous assumptions concerning the author's available language discriminations and specification: (1) that the ancients made modern discriminations that we know they could not have had in their repertoire; taking *pur* (fire) as an example, the distinctions between combustion, fusion, oxidation and phosphorescence were not available), and (2) that a use is given to a word that would have been beneath the level of specificity of which the author was capable. I again use *pur* as an example. Closer to our period, Hume's choice of *individual* may have been uninformed by the distinction that I drew in my example.

There are still more reasons to take some translations with a grain of salt or, at least, without cognitive neutrality. Beyond resisting the allure of the words themselves, we must bear in mind that the very act of translation is often a controversial, and sometimes a political one. Polysemous linguistic constructions can find themselves bereft when a single meaning is selected for political reasons, or, as Palmer points out, for the

[144] Guthrie 1988. p. 404.

more mundane reasons of convenience, error, or laziness[145]. In addition, and as a reminder that translation is not only a trans-linguistic activity but also an intra-linguistic one, the families of uses of a linguistic item within a single language can find themselves orthogonal to one another in their dimensions of use. Consider as an example the term *truth*, a term that affects much of philosophical vocabulary. There it has become a property of sentences as well as of people rather than one exclusively of people, as it was in its earlier English use .[146] In the same way, the philosophical understanding of *responsibility* has, for some philosophers, lost contact with its use as *answerability*.[147] The point is that, potentially, other readings that might illuminate past understanding can be neglected or lost. If this is the case, then only a persistent will accompanied by a high standard of methodological care can hope to recover even hints of original understandings. In ordinary discourse, it is easy to dismiss a recovered or former use as eccentric or unintelligible. But one of the lessons of Steiner, and it applies everywhere, is that we have to be cautious lest it is our ignorance that is creating the problem, rather than a word's intelligibility.

Notwithstanding all these difficulties, it goes without saying that, if we are to understand our difficulties in understanding, we cannot give up on translation. It is our only way into texts, particularly those of the ancients. What we can give up on is its claim to authority. Circumspection is called for in any flight to the references. One test that we can apply in our assessment of, say, an English translation of Aristotle's works, is to ask the question: how would we translate the translation on its ordinary English

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[145] Palmer, L.R. 1950. The Indo-European Origins of Greek Justice. In *Transactions of the Philological Society 1951. Oxford:* Basil Blackwell p.151.
[146] *OED truth sv.*
[147] Ibid *responsibility sv.*

understanding into the original language. We could answer using a principle that I will call 'inverse translation':

> **Principle of Inverse Translation**: We can trust a translation from Greek word B to English word A only if we can translate English word A into ancient Greek word B.

The principle suggests that, in weighing the helpful uses and hindrances of a dictionary, we should at least go both ways, that is, we should ask whether the use of both words, the one in the original language and the dominant, ordinary one of the word chosen as a translation, are capable of being mapped onto one another in both directions.[148] For example, we would almost certainly be wrong if we used Aristotle's *huparche* as a Greek translation of the English word *belong* in its ordinary English use as denoting the relationship either of possession or of an individual to a class. These two notions would more likely be represented by the Greek *einai* [149]. Better to ask what English word would require translation into *huparche*. *Belong* might well be that word, but, perhaps, in its more specialized legal use as entitled inheritance, or accrual, of properties by virtue of subordination, as when, for instance, a Greek province inherited the legal structure of the city state.[150] The relationships of possession, membership and subordination all represent a particular relata structure, but there are subtle differences. In our efforts to understand the Aristotelian syllogism, it is worthwhile taking into account the pre-Aristotelian uses of *huparche* from which Aristotle likely appropriated the word for technical use.

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[148] I am grateful to Dr Jennings for this point. He refers to the principle as a 'bio-morphic constraint on translation'.

[149] Woodhouse, S.C. 1959. English-*Greek Dictionary: A Vocabulary of the Attic Language*. London: Routledge & K. Paul *belong* sv.

[150] Liddell, Henry and Robert Scott. 1961. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press ὑπάρχειν. sv.

Since, as I have acknowledged, we need translation, then all that we can do, while cultivating a healthy unconfidence, is to do the best that we can, and to critically use the resources available to us. One strategy might be to look to the actions and resources of the author. To instance scientific language: the introduction of a new word into an explanatory theory may create what Steiner has classified as a *tactical difficulty*. To help us unravel that difficulty, it may behove us to assume that the author has probably appropriated that word from some other use, or has constructed it from what he saw as suitable fragments. It would be useful, therefore, to look to the resources upon which he drew, and, if the term's use has been appropriated from that of another, to the common structure of both. Thus, we may do well to call upon the resources of etymology; indeed, these may be all that we have.

(iii) Etymology

But, here too, a warning must be sounded. L.R.Palmer has alerted us to the worry that etymology rests on the intellectually shifting sands of assumption. Two of its general principles are, he warns, particularly suspect:

1. Resemblances of sound and meaning items of different languages cannot be due to chance.

2. Change (in word use) has to pass the test of intelligibility and to find the approval of the hearer.[151]

The first is a working, or intuitive, principle. It does not rule out the possibility, no matter how remote, that there exist two, or more, distinct languages, between which such resemblances came about by chance. As to the second, Palmer does not tell us what standard of intelligibility is in play for the etymologist when tracing a word's usage, other

[151]Palmer 1972. pp. 300 & 309.

than to say that any change in the 'word-referent relation' by a speaker would have had to be understood by the hearer.[152] By such a general observation, we can suppose that the standard of intelligibility applied by the etymologist is a very low one. After all, we, together with the etymologist, cannot assume that earlier language users understood, in any philosophically satisfying way, their languages any better than we do our own.

Palmer succinctly makes the point that, as a principle-based model, etymology can deliver only probability:

> Probability' is a word which must be stressed. Despite all refinements of method and close attention to documentation the scholar must more often than not resign himself to a *non liquet*.[153]

Elsewhere he reassures us that etymologists, however, can increase that probability through rigorous methodology.[154] But, if all that we can have is probability, then it follows that we can have no more than bounded conjecture, and we can make no more than tentative claims. And, if we want to accredit conjecture, then we should require that the highest available standard of methodological care be used in its probability calculus. To this end, as we shall see, Palmer's own model offers some promise. Bounded conjecture that is educated by an appreciation of the difficulties is surely more useful to understanding than speculation based on false friends and unwarranted assumptions. Thus, a further requirement follows from Palmer's warnings: it should be clearly stated that claims of translation are claims from speculation and intellectual travail, and not from authority or intellectual certitude, even if supported by the highest available standard of methodological care.

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[152] Ibid. p. 308.
[153] Palmer 1972. p. 340.
[154] Palmer 1950. p. 150ff.

Section 3: The Difficulty of Explanatory Idioms

Steiner, in his laudable effort to shape a theory of difficulty, is, I submit, wrestling with a difficulty created by his choice of an explanatory model. The difficulty is this. His classification, while useful in describing types of difficulties and their sources, uses a semantic account of language. But we have only a pre-theoretical understanding of the vocabulary of that account: terms such as *meaning* and *intention* are among those that we cannot fix theoretically. We can use them conversationally to some effect, but it bears repeating that their theoretical use is unreliable since we do not know what they are; they are themselves data requiring explanation

Consider, for example, the term *intention*. John Austin uses it to describe what he calls, 'the illocutionary force' of speech-acts [155]. Within his general theory of performative language, Austin distinguishes between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary speech-acts.[156] In his schematic model, the locutionary act is 'the issuing of an utterance'[157], the making of sounds which can be recognized as words, phrases or sentences, and which have a referent and/or meaning; the illocutionary act is the force or, as Austin calls it, the 'intention' of the locutionary act, for example, requesting, ordering or asserting; the perlocutionary act is the effect of the illocutionary act or the force (intention) of the locutionary act, for example, 'he convinced', 'he persuaded'.[158] But, as Hume reminds us, we cannot observe a force; we can only draw an inference from effects.[159] Since we cannot observe *intention,* how can we find a causal link between

[155] Austin, John. 1965. *How To Do Things with Words* New York: Oxford University Press p.72.
[156] Ibid. p. 94ff.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid. p. 98ff.
[159] Beauchamp p.136 & 109ff.

illocutionary and perlocutionary speech-acts? How can we use it in empirical linguistic experiments? How can we use it in our explanations?

There are yet other reasons why the use of the mentalist vocabulary of natural language is theoretically unreliable. First, it may assume a commitment to a particular ontology of mind. However, amongst philosophers of mind, that ontology is fraught with difficulties. We may try to avoid the difficulties by referring to neural states rather than mental or intentional states. But we must then face the question of how language evolved from neurally embedded sensory-motor systems in the first place. Our understanding of the brain is still inadequate, and, I would suggest, too pliant a hook on which to hang an explanatory theory of one of its features. The most that we can hazard is that there is a relationship between the brain and language, and that, biologically, they have co-evolved.[160]

Another difficulty is that we have an imperfect understanding of the semantic content of mental vocabulary. Nor do we seem to require one in order to use it to effect in our everyday conversations, or to transmit a conversational understanding of its uses from one generation of language speakers to the next. Thus, I can ask my young grandson whether he intends to kick the ball, or warn him to mind his step, without first having to conduct a semantic audit of his understanding of *intend* or *mind.* We can offer an account of how mental terms enter a language and come to have the uses that they have, but such accounts often only lay bare the futility of seeking an explicit semantic understanding of the vocabulary beyond that required for conversational use.

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[160] For a full discussion cf. Bickerton, Derek.1992. *Language and Species.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press and Calvin, William H.1996. *Cerebral Code: Thinking a Thought in the Mosaics of the Mind.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Keeping in mind the worries previously noted with respect to lexicography, a brief lexicographical history of the English term *'intend'* may further illuminate the point. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) remarks on the, '...extensive and complex development of its senses'[161], and states that, '...the history of some senses is obscure...the senses of early quotations is often difficult to determine'[162]. We can speculate, however, that its use in English derives from its Latin and Norman French uses.[163] In Latin, its primary non-figurative use referred to the drawing of a bowstring, its secondary to the pointing towards a target, the secondary use being an exploitation of a feature of the primary reference. These non-figurative uses persisted into seventeenth - century English, uses that seem to have died with the coming of firearms. The following forms part of the historical evidence:

> 1601. GILL *Trinity in Sacr. Philos.* (1625) 223, I will onely intend my finger to some very few.[164]

The first figurative uses of the verb were also spatial, for example, *intendere animum (*to aim one's soul). A similar use is found in eighteenth century English:

> 1711. Hearne *Collect.* (O.H.S.) III. 181 He blam'd himself that he could not intend his Mind in y^e^ Prayers.[165]

The historical evidence suggests the loss of the non-figurative use of *intend*, and the ellipsis of the mention of *soul* or *mind* in its figurative use. It does not reveal, however, how *intend* might have been transformed into a theoretically useful term. What we have is a word that requires explanation, and data that needs to be analyzed by a language

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[161] Here we find the lexicographers introducing theoretical vocabulary (*sense*) that any linguist must query.
[162] *OED intend sv.*
[163] Jennings, R.E. 2004 *Language, Logic and the Brain* ms. Burnaby: Simon Fraser University p.5.
[164] *OED intend sv.*
[165] Ibid

theorist. It cannot, therefore, be the idiom of choice in any explanatory model of linguistic difficulty that does not acquiesce in the vagueness that conversational language use would tolerate.

There is yet another concern that plays no significant role in this thesis but deserves to be mentioned (and then set aside) because it is a source of uncertainty about *intention*, that is, whether action, intentional or not, may be the result of activity in the cortex. The issue is, of course, not unimportant, but it lies outside the scope of this thesis. The concern is that the conversational and folk-psychologic uses of *intention* assume full control by a speaker over what he is saying, a control that is not always evident; 'it just slipped out' or 'I said it without thinking' are but two examples of what we say in English about our sometime lack of control over what we say. If William Calvin is right[166], there may be a physiological explanation; that whatever 'slips out' is the upshot of very fast Darwinian selection. He theorizes that because of the limited cortical workspace available for the production of phonemic strings there is competition between linguistic items for production. There is no reason to suppose that whatever comes out is the result of conscious choice, and not rather of selective pressures that include the functions of triggering and cueing: for example, how we end a sentence is seldom rehearsed; more often it is triggered by how we start it. Likewise, in speech, we often find ourselves starting a sentence without being able to complete it. To get ourselves back on track, we will restart the sentence, relying on the triggering properties of the restart words for the finish. All this usually happens in microseconds unless, of course, we are 'stuck for words'. Similarly, for the most part, how we respond to a greeting, as in 'good

[166] Calvin pp. 72ff. & 155 ff.

morning', is cued rather than consciously constructed. Much the same can be said about our choice of vocabulary in different social settings. Using my grandson once more as an example, my selection of vocabulary when conversing with him is, I hope, different from the vocabulary of my contributions to a graduate philosophy seminar...nothing need be said about the comparative quality and effectiveness of my vocabular selections in those respective settings! Other selective pressures on what I say may have such physiological causes as the amount of breath still available to me.[167]

These objections to the theoretical use of the language of *intention* (much the same concerns can be raised against other mentalistic vocabulary) need not prevent us from using it conversationally when discussing theory, as long as it is made clear that it is a conversational understanding that is being invoked. However, we want an understanding of difficulty that goes beyond the conversational. We also want the standard of success in overcoming difficulty to include full discursive comprehension. In using a semantic account of poetic difficulty, Steiner has left much work to do. He himself acknowledges the preliminary nature of his work, but suggests that any further work on a theory of difficulty would need to take his classification into consideration.[168] I leave that work for others. Rather, my strategy is to change the paradigm, to work in a different explanatory idiom

Section 4: The Difficulty of Language Change

I will now consider an approach to language that, in my opinion, promises a *second-order* explanation of some of our difficulties in recovering archaic understanding. It is an

[167] Cf. Lieberman 2006. pp. 5 & 325ff.
[168] Steiner 1980. p. 47.

approach that takes into account the physical phenomenology of language change. Allowing myself, at the moment, the language of semantic value, I can assert an evident banality: that is, words, over the course of their lifecycle, change their value. The nature, types and stages of these value changes have been sufficiently documented in the biology of language literature.[169] The sorts of things I have in mind are morphological reductions (*'cos*, *blog*), mutations resulting from syntactical misconstrual, migration, allotropy, extinction, and so on For illustration, we can revisit the now familiar example of the emergence in English of connective (syntactic value) from lexical (semantic value) terms. However, because we do not know it, the literature is silent on the rate of change for different features of language. Nevertheless, the evidence indicates that not all vocabulary changes its value at the same time, or at the same rate, and that the items of any given sentence are, likely, at different stages of change.

Our difficulty, on this account, is particularly grave when we look at language use long gone, since there is no record of the manifold of changes. Nevertheless, when we are trying to get at the use of an archaic word, this lack cannot excuse us from asking such questions as: at what stage of change is this word that is destined, at a later stage, to become, say, grammaticalized? Only careful scholarship under conditions of sufficient evidence can hazard an adequate answer: where the record is fragmented, there can be no such answer. I draw once more on the example of Thales' use of the language of *water*. Perhaps its use was undergoing change; perhaps it was losing its semantic value and acquiring some functional use; certainly, his philosophical descendants have supposed that it had acquired, or was acquiring, a theoretical use.

[169] See Jennings bibliography in this paper's *Reference List.* p. 126.

Even on a semantic account, given the features of language change, perceived distinctions between values, semantic, syntactic or otherwise, blur and fade away. At any rate, with a sufficiently archaic language, the initial drawing of distinctions is nigh impossible since we might be unable to recognize what role a word is playing, let alone discern any distinctions. Under these conditions, the language of semantic value, with its assumed distinctions, can only offer a second-order description of language change and, it follows, of our difficulties in recovering archaic understanding. Thus, by his own lights, in not considering language in general, Steiner can offer only descriptive explanations of textual difficulty. If what we want is a second-order explanation, then a language that invites us to talk of language in more general and encompassing terms, that is, in terms that do not distinguish between the roles of words in expressions or take into account what a word 'means', is likely more promising. Such a language may be one that treats speech as the fundamental observable of language, that invites us to talk about physical phenomenon in physical terms, and that describes speech as something that is *produced* physically and has physical *effects*. On this account words are treated as having physical value.

To be sure, when produced, words can have different physical (neural) effects depending upon the circumstances of their production. Any account explaining their variable physical effects would, like a semantic account, be descriptive, and complex. But, as an idiom for explaining language change, the language of production and effect can have utility by simply asserting the fact that words have physical effects. Thus, we can say that a string of vocables when produced affects its audience. We can say further that, if the production is novel because it comprises a new combination of vocables, then

it will have a first effect; if it is novel because it is uttered in a new setting then it may retain its former 'meaning' but its former effect is discontinued since its audience now has to sort out effects not present for a previous audience. The earlier example of *lust* serves as illustration.

The novel usage of a word can result from deliberate appropriation, but it can also result from error on the part of either the speaker or the hearer. In the case of error, the novel and the pre-existing uses can co-exist undetected for some time until eventually the population of users of the former is sufficiently robust that it cannot be undone. Two examples in English are *an apron* and *an umpire* (formerly *a naperon* and *a numpire*). Both were created when users misheard the initial 'n' as attached to the article 'a', as in '*a naperon*' and '*a numpere*'[170] The pre-existing use may or may not live on. One way in which it may is through its deliberate resurrection by poets[171], giving rise to what Steiner has classified as a tactical difficulty. Either way, it may form part of the record, or text, and present us with a difficulty in recovering its pre-existing effects. Those who understand a term's pre-existing use as its current use, of course, see no difficulty. In their failure to abstract away later accretions of production and effects they, as Steiner remarks, unknowingly create more difficulty for us through misreading and misunderstanding. The term *metaphor* is by now a familiar example.

It is this 'discontinuity of effect' as a feature of language change, particularly if it goes undetected, that may form one of the major barriers to our recovery of archaic understanding. Where the language is a living one and its record, as well as the skill of those who study it, is sufficiently rich, then a discontinuity of effect can perhaps

[170] *OED apron* and *umpire sv.*
[171] Steiner cites as examples T.S.Eliot's use of *pneumatic*, and Tennyson's *disedge* in Steiner 1978 p.20.

eventually be detected, and difficulties in understanding can perhaps be overcome, as in *apron* and *umpire*. Where the language is no longer living, we can be pretty sure that discontinuity of effect was a feature of that language, but we cannot know its nature or how to overcome our ignorance. L.R.Palmer, as we shall see in the next chapter, sees some structural ways around the problem. Indeed, we may be able to recover, with the resources of etymology and translation, the lexical 'meaning' of archaic words, although evidently this remains unfinished business[172], but how can we excise our experience of the effect of that 'meaning' in our language in order to experience its archaic effect? Simply answered, given the facts of language change, we cannot. But we want to have something, and, for that, we do need semantics. Regrettably but advisedly, for all the reasons given in this chapter, whatever we get from a descriptive account, that is, whatever we claim as a 'meaning', can be only an approximation.

[172] The work of L.R.Palmer as given in Chapter 3 of this thesis is evidence of this.

CHAPTER 3: A MODEL FOR UNDERSTANDING

Section 1: Palmer's Philological Model

To date, there seems to have emerged within philosophy neither a unified theoretical framework nor a technical vocabulary for theorizing specifically about difficult philosophical vocabulary. *A fortiori,* none has emerged for theorizing about ancient vocabulary either. I have considered one literary model of difficulty and, in noting its interest for philosophy, have attempted to generalize its findings to philosophically difficult vocabulary. Its inadequacy is by now apparent. We want to think of philosophical theories as more than literary gesturing.

A quite different model for understanding such difficulties may have emerged within philology (the systematic study of word origins). One philological study in particular seems sufficiently germane that it warrants presenting here, since its data are drawn specifically from ancient *philosophical* vocabulary. Of equal value is its intriguing suggestion that similar applications of other philological resources might be exploited in improving our understanding of other difficult vocabulary. Additionally, and significantly, we are provided with something like a method that imposes broad constraints on conversational understanding, and that may, thus, supply at least one condition of explanatory adequacy for such theories.

Three purposes are central to my presenting this sketch of L.W. Palmer's article, *The Indo-European Origins of Greek Justice*. In the first place, Palmer's philological method effects a quantitative improvement over any merely conversational but *isolated*

understanding of difficult vocabulary. Even if we can have only a conversational understanding of a vocable, we might bring to bear a conversational understanding of other, *related* vocables Thus, though we may not be able to improve the quality of our understanding beyond the conversational, we can at any rate muster a more reliable understanding at that level. The difficulty will lie in determining what other vocabulary counts as related. As we shall see, by offering guidance in that quarter, Palmer offers us one way of setting broader constraints upon purported conversational understandings. A second purpose is that we may be able to take from his findings one way of understanding the historical sources of some of our difficulties.

As Professor of Comparative Philology in the University of Oxford during the years 1952-71, Palmer published extensively on classical subjects. His own attainments and standards of scholarship give some assurance that at least we set a high methodological standard in adopting his general approach. Now it is not within my purpose to wade beyond the shallow end of philology, nor to indulge in an unschooled use of the philological method. However, a look at his methods may provide us with some useful techniques for a broad range of philosophical applications. Finally, the lengths to which he has to go to make his case, the very scale and complexity of his technical framework, is stark evidence of his judgement of the scale of the difficulties that he saw himself facing.

Palmer's central purpose, of course, is none of these. As a philologist, he is interested in the structure, historical development, and relationships of languages and language families. However, the difficulties that I am concerned with are clearly not far from mind when he alerts us that the evidence we are warranted in appealing to for

insights into the past can itself be a barrier to gaining those insights [173] Palmer was not a philosopher, and was not beset with philosophical worries Regrettably, it is unclear whether his overall purpose in his article on Greek *justice* is to say something about the word '*dikê*' or the conception of *dikê*. That lack of clarity, however, need not subtract from the value of his method.

Palmer argues for his claim that Greek *justice (dikê)* had Indo-European origins by conducting a comparative etymological analysis of the Greek and Indo-European moral vocabularies. A remark on the inherited English translation of *dikê* as *justice* is in order here. That translation is, of course, subject to the strictures of Chapter 2 of this thesis. Fortunately, the English word *justice* is sufficiently vague that it does not set any very specific constraints on translation. However, it is, like so many of the terms used in philosophy, difficult vocabulary, and could, presumably, be subjected to a similar study as *dikê*: that is, whatever method Palmer employs to try to understand *dikê* one might usefully apply in a similar exercise in trying to understand the English term *justice*. My acquiescence in the use of *justice* as the English translation of *dikê* is for expository purposes, and is without prejudice on that score.

Palmer declares his motivation for the project to be his objection to the prevailing acceptance by a number of Greek scholars, Guthrie and F.M. Cornford among them, of the interpretation, in English, of the root of Greek *dikê* (justice) as a *path*.[174] This acceptance proceeds from what he sees as over-simple etymological analysis.[175] Whilst acknowledging that language can be a source of evidence in the recovering of past

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[173] Palmer 1950. p. 150.
[174] Ibid p. 149.
[175] Ibid.

understandings, he alerts us to its dangers. He warns that we must go beyond translation if we are to rely on linguistic evidence since any translation is only as good as its supporting etymological model.[176] He reassures us that etymological analysis can help us grasp an understanding of the ideas of antiquity but that the 'strictest methodology'[177] must be employed.

Palmer's methodology begins with the assumption that there are two aspects to fixing a word's history: its sound and its meaning.[178] [179]He here issues another warning, telling us that it is easy to detect phonetic resemblance between words but that such resemblances are often accidental and can, therefore, be misleading.[180] He then declares his semantic bias by asserting the etymological importance of meaning over sound.[181] He asserts that a term's meaning can be established only by paying careful attention to the context of its occurrence.[182] In the discussion that follows, it becomes clear that what Palmer is referring to as a word's 'context' is the *text* in which a term is embedded.

From these assumptions concerning meaning and context, Palmer builds his analytical model. It introduces two theoretical constructs: the first he calls a *semantic field*, the second a *semantic structure*. The former concerns a single word in isolation that I will call the *organizing word*, and the latter the broader vocabulary of what he calls a *conceptual field*.

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[176] Palmer 1950 p.151.
[177] Ibid p.150.
[178] Ibid.
[179] For the purposes of exposition, and with his overall purpose not being mine, I acquiesce, as I have done previously with Steiner, in Palmer's use of the language of meaning, itself comprising difficult vocabulary.
[180] Palmer 1950p.150.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Ibid.

(i) Semantic field

Palmer's notion of a word's *semantic field* is temporally indexed to a particular time, and consists of what he calls its, 'contemporaneous meanings'[183]. (Using a biology of language model, I will represent these extensionally as the *classes of circumstances that occasion the use of a word at a given time*, to be abbreviated as *occasion classes*). He recognizes that some of these would have emerged in earlier times. As a fair way of understanding what he means by *semantic field*, he offers the notion of an isolated word having a single semantic structure in which it is the organizing component.[184] It follows for Palmer, therefore, that understanding each of its *field's* occasion classes is essential to any adequate understanding of the *field's* organizing word. He comments on the inadequate practice of translating some uses of a given word to the neglect of others.[185]

The following is a sketch of Palmer's account of how his notion of a *semantic field* led him to his position on the origins of Greek *justice*. His recounting of his explorations usefully gives some substance to his notion of a semantic field. Palmer tells us that his present grasp of the Greek understanding of *dikê* arose gradually, and unintentionally, from his observations of the semantic fields of various Indo-European words denoting *boundary*. He had been interested initially in the English word *mark*, a derivative of the Old English *mearc*, meaning 'mark, sign, landmark, boundary'. He made note of its cognates in other Germanic languages that also have a meaning of 'field', 'ground', and 'territory'. He then noticed that the OE *mearc* is cognate with the Latin word *margo*[186], and with the Celtic *morogi* meaning *'country'*. Palmer lists for us

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[183] Palmer 1950 p.150-151.
[184] Ibid p.151.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Palmer does not mention its connection to the modern English *margin*.

other meanings of the English *mark* that he found in its semantic field, namely, 'characteristic', those having to do with marksmanship -'aim, goal, target', and those referring to the acts of 'pointing out', indicating', and 'remarking'. Palmer thus sets the stage for analysis by giving us his findings on two aspects of his chosen English *boundary* word: its cognates that carry a corresponding meaning, and the component meanings of its semantic field.

Palmer next turned his attention to a *boundary* word in another cognate language, the Latin *modus*. Although predominantly meaning 'measure', he points out that it also carries the meanings of 'limit', 'merely', and 'only'. He traced the development of *modus* through the Italic dialects and the Celtic and Germanic languages, and found its meanings variously attached to legal senses of 'measure', 'judgment', 'index', 'fate', and 'what is meted out'. He then looked at *Mal*[187] a Germanic boundary word that can mean 'a point or limit in time' (he remarks that the English word *meal* is a derivative). He reports that uses of *Mal* referring to time can be traced across the Slavonic languages, as can its meaning of 'measure' and 'throw'. Other Germanic meanings of *Mal* include 'aim', 'goal', 'designation', and 'monument'. Palmer concluded his exploration of the semantic fields of *boundary* words with the Greek word *horos* which has the meanings 'boundary', 'landmark', 'interval', 'magistrate's decision', 'memorial stone or pillar', and 'standard or measure'. The following is Palmer's own observational plotting of the, 'possible semantic ramifications' [188] of the semantic fields of the *boundary* words that he had investigated:

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[187] Palmer 1950 p.152.
[188] Ibid p.153.

Mark
Indication, point out, say
Characteristic.
Aim, goal, winning post, throw
Boundary mark
(of space) limit; measure; territory
(of time) opportune moment, appointed time, season, year
(metaphorical) dividing line, decision, judgment
Outline
Shape, form, mode, manner[189]

Moving on in his investigation, Palmer next noticed the linkage of the German *Mal* with the Gothic *mel* that, through a biblical translation, is linked with the Greek word *katros*.[190] This prompted his exploration of the semantic field of *katros*. He noticed that the most common meanings of *katros* are 'measure', 'time limit', and 'opportune moment', meanings that are present on the fringes of the fields of the various *boundary* words that he had previously examined. He wondered whether or not instances could be found where κατρός carries any of the meanings at the core of those fields. He reports success, citing examples from Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides where it is used for such expressions as, 'short of the mark' and 'hitting the mark'.[191] He also gives examples from Hesiod, Pindar and Democritus where *katros* has a meaning of 'limit' and 'dividing line'. Claiming to have established a finding that many of the fundamental components of the semantic field of *katros* are the same as those that he had noticed previously in the semantic fields of *mark*, *modus*, *Mal* and *horos*, Palmer then makes his move to connect his findings thus far to the topic of Greek *justice*.

He reports an observation that *katros* is frequently coupled with *dikê* in the ancient texts. This led him to examine *dikê's* semantic field. He began by examining the

[189] Palmer 1950 p. 153
[190] Ibid. p.154.
[191] Ibid. p.154-155.

semantic field of what he takes to be *dikê's* root word, that is, *deik*. Believing there to be little doubt that *δείκ's* original meaning was 'I show, point out'[192], he noted that its semantic field resembled those of '*modus*, *mark* and the rest'.[193] Because of its root, he hypothesized that *dikê* would have an original meaning as 'boundary' and 'mark'. Not only did he find in both Homer and Hesiod the frequent idiomatic use of *dikê* in passages dealing with themes of straightness and crookedness, particularly in connection with judgment, as in:

> This underlying notion of a judgment as the drawing of a line is made particularly explicit by Theognis, who writes: "I must decide this *dikê* by carpenter's line and setsquare."[194]

but he also found, in the same references, passages which he believes mark a transition of meaning from 'boundary' to one of' rightful portion', 'lot' and 'fate'. He singled out for interest the word *tekmairetai,* a derivative of *tekmar* meaning a 'fixed mark, boundary, goal, aim, end'[195], and frequently found alongside *dikê*. He tells us that it is used, and translated, in a Hesiodic passage as:

> '[the] works which the gods marked out, assigned to, allocated to, men'.[196]

He cites the following Homeric passage as another example of the transition of *dikê* to the sense of 'allotted portion, rightful portion, lot, fate':

> But thereafter let him make amends to you in his hut with a rich feast that you may have nothing lacking of your *dikê*. And you, Atreides, hereafter shall be more *dikaios* towards another man."[197]

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[192] Palmer 1950 p.157.
[193] Ibid p.158.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid p.160.
[196] Ibid.
[197] Ibid.

Palmer reads *dikaios* as describing one, "[who] observes propriety in the matter of rightful portion"[198]. For the sense of 'fate' and 'lot', he again cites Homer: "This is a man's lot (*dikê*) when he is absent from his homeland as long as I."[199]

Palmer concludes the recounting of his etymological tracing of *dikê* by commenting on its meaning, 'to throw'. This he explains as a, 'surviving representative of that part of the semantic field which we have labelled 'marksmanship'', and discounts its value in any explanation of Greek justice.[200] With these findings, Palmer claims to have established that *dikê's* semantic field shares the semantic ramifications of other IE *boundary* words.

How are we to understand Palmer's notion, and use, of a *semantic field*? His account is under-specified, claiming only that the polysemy, or range of uses, of a given word is structural with each of its meanings required for an adequate understanding of its use. He gives us only a descriptive account of the relations between word uses, offering no explanation of how they came about. However, by considering Palmer's proposition in its methodical application, we can, perhaps, achieve a more detailed account or, at least, represent it extensionally in such a way as to be theoretically useful for my present purposes. To do so requires that I drop some of his semantic assumptions; doing so does not destroy the fundamental content.

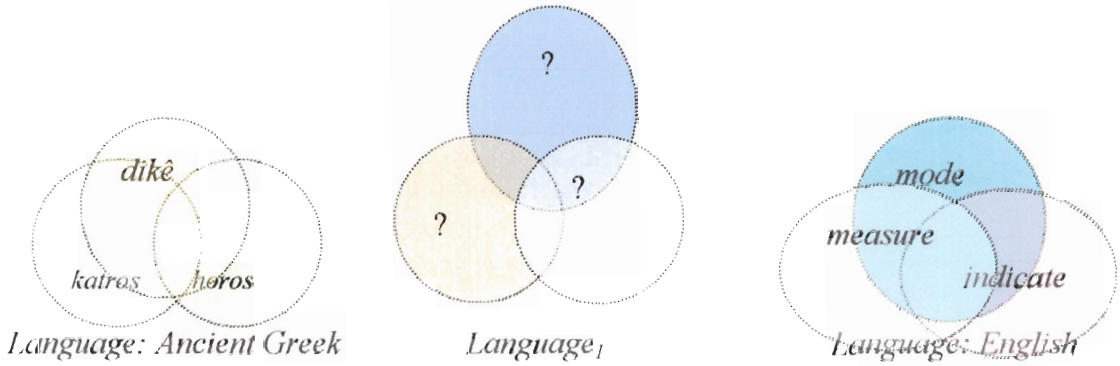
In our extensional understanding of Palmer's notion of a *semantic field*, it might be useful to think of it as a mathematical, rather then as a physical, space: that is, a space with indeterminate boundaries, and one dense with possibilities for continuous variation. I have introduced previously the substitute term: *occasion classes*. We have no reason to

[198] Palmer 1950 p.161.
[199] Ibid.
[200] Ibid.

suppose that they have a particular structure, or that they have boundaries. If they do, we have no way of knowing how we would recognize or count them. Thus, we have no need to assume that *occasion classes* are disjoint. To paraphrase Palmer, we can say: this word *p* is seen often in the company of this other word *q*. Thus, we can accept as plausible Palmer's proposal, as suggested by his analysis, that there is some process that naturally brings words into association with one another because the *occasion classes* of one vocable overlaps with the *occasion classes* of another. This association can be thought of as a union, or collection, of *occasion classes*. Because of Palmer's reliance on resemblance as a relational feature, I will represent the union as that of a *family of occasion classes*. As an *occasion class* joins a new family, we can suppose that it naturally brings along any other family, or families, that it has acquired along the way. Hence, we can predict that, at various points within *families of occasion classes*, an *occasion class* will encounter noise and interference from other vocabulary. Moral vocabulary is an example. Much of it has uses that are non-moral and that run interference in our moral discourse.

Figure 1 graphically represents one two-dimensional extensional realization of Palmer's notion of a *semantic field* at a given time showing clusters of only 3 occasion classes:

Figure 1: *Semantic field*



(ii) Semantic structure

His findings notwithstanding, Palmer prudently observes that any resemblance between the semantic fields of *boundary* words in cognate languages does not imply a generalized connection respecting justice. He cautions that a parallel development of 'boundary' words could have occurred quite independently and naturally.[201] In further support for his thesis, he now needs to introduce his model's second theoretical construct: the notion of *semantic structure*. This he defines as a structure within a given vocabulary with, 'complex interrelations of its component features', and within which the terms of the vocabulary harmonize with one another.[202] Elsewhere in his writings he offers a more developed explanation.[203] It begins, using his semantic idiom, with the observation that the sense of a word depends on its collocation with other words. When displayed lexically, these collocations, he claims, can be seen as structural since, 'they state

[201] Palmer 1950 p.162.
[202] Ibid.
[203] Palmer 1972 p. 189.

relations holding between lexical items'[204]. According to Palmer, the collocation, or semantic structure, of words reflect the 'world' structure, particularly the social structure.[205] The social structure is cast as a conceptual field with its own semantically structured vocabulary.[206] Palmer's interest for the purpose of his article lies with moral vocabulary.[207] He proposes that if the semantic structure of a moral vocabulary in a particular language is complex and peculiar, then any resemblance between it and the semantic structures of moral vocabularies in other cognate languages will be non-accidental.[208]

Palmer applies the notion of *semantic structure* to an examination of *dikê*'s collocations in the Greek moral vocabulary. Building on his claim to have established *dikê*'s meaning as 'boundary' and 'mark', he hypothesizes that other expressions in the Greek moral vocabulary will harmonize with that meaning, and, further, that that harmonized meaning will reoccur in other cognate languages. A confirmation of this hypothesis, he claims, would justify a conclusion that the moral vocabularies of some Indo-European languages, including that of the Greek language, share a common ancestry, and, hence, his thesis respecting the Indo-European origins of Greek justice.

He begins this next stage of his analysis by examining the Greek language of *dikê*. Citing Aeschylus, he notes that the just man, "remains within his mark or limits', these being his, "proper portion or allotment".[209] He offers examples of this meaning of *dikê* in the works of Heraclitus and Anaximander in which to trespass or transgress, that is, to be

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[204] Ibid.
[205] Ibid p 194.
[206] Ibid.
[207] Palmer 1950 p.162.
[208] Palmer 1950 p.162
[209] Ibid.

unjust, is to step over one's proper portion.[210] Next, citing references from Pindar, Sophocles and Aeschylus, he notes that the figure of a jealous, brooding spirit who distributes, and then oversees, the allotment of the 'proper portion' is a frequent figure in Greek literature.[211] He instances a Homeric passage featuring Aisa and Poros, 'the oldest of the gods', and suggests that they are, 'the mythological expression for [the] primal... act of distribution...'[212]. Referring in particular to Professors Cornford and Sheppard, Palmer points to the standard acceptance of the thesis that Greek thought, in all its domains, was dominated by these notions of proper portion and staying within one's mark.[213]

Palmer next turned his attention to the moral vocabularies of other cognate Indo-European languages. Citing Berriedale Keith on the Indo-Iranian language, he makes reference to *Rta*, 'a regular order that rules the physical world', and, 'a firm and abiding principle residing in man'.[214] Referencing Dumezil on ancient Hindu, Palmer tells us that the former has noted that many Hindu myths were concerned with the primordial act of distribution which produced the universal order, and which involved two central figures of divinity, *Amca* and *Bhaga*, understood as 'portion' and 'distributor'.[215] Palmer noted that a derived verb of Bhaga, *bhaksati*, means, 'eats, devour, consume', whilst, in Old Persian, *Baga* means 'god'.[216] He charts Bhaga's semantic structure as (1) divide, apportion (2) feast (3) god, and remarks on the connection of the Greek *daōmos* translated as 'distribute, divide' to a set of Greek words translated as having to do with

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[210] Ibid p.163.
[211] Ibid.
[212] Ibid p.165.
[213] Palmer 1950 p.164.
[214] Ibid p.165.
[215] Ibid p.166.
[216] Ibid 162

feasting and banqueting, and with *daimōn*, a general word in Greek for a supernatural being.[217]

Palmer then gives us equivalences to the notions represented by Aisa and Poros that, he claims, are present in the Slavonic languages. Amongst these are the Russian expression for fate, *dolja* and *casti*, both meaning 'part, share'. He also notes the Slavonic assignment of divinity to *dazibogu*, a term that originally meant, 'the giver of wealth'.[218]

Drawing on this evidence, Palmer claims to have established that there exists in the moral vocabularies of cognate Indo-European languages a peculiar semantic structure that gives linguistic expression to a worldview that understands *justice* as proper apportionment within a cosmic order that has been settled by an, 'elemental act', of allotment and apportionment; this primary apportionment is presided over by a divine agent, is respected by the just man, and cannot be changed by mere humans without dire consequences.[219] He concludes that since the moral vocabulary of the Greek language seems to share a common semantic structure with the moral vocabularies of several cognate languages, they must share a common ancestry. Further, that an understanding of *dikê* as 'boundary' and 'mark' places it within the semantic structure of the Greek moral vocabulary, and, thus, justifies his claim with respect to the Indo-European origins of Greek justice.[220]

In summary, first, by applying the notion of a *semantic field*, Palmer establishes a use of the term *dikê* as 'boundary and mark'; second, by applying the notion of a *semantic structure*, he establishes that *dikê*, when used as 'boundary 'and 'mark', is part

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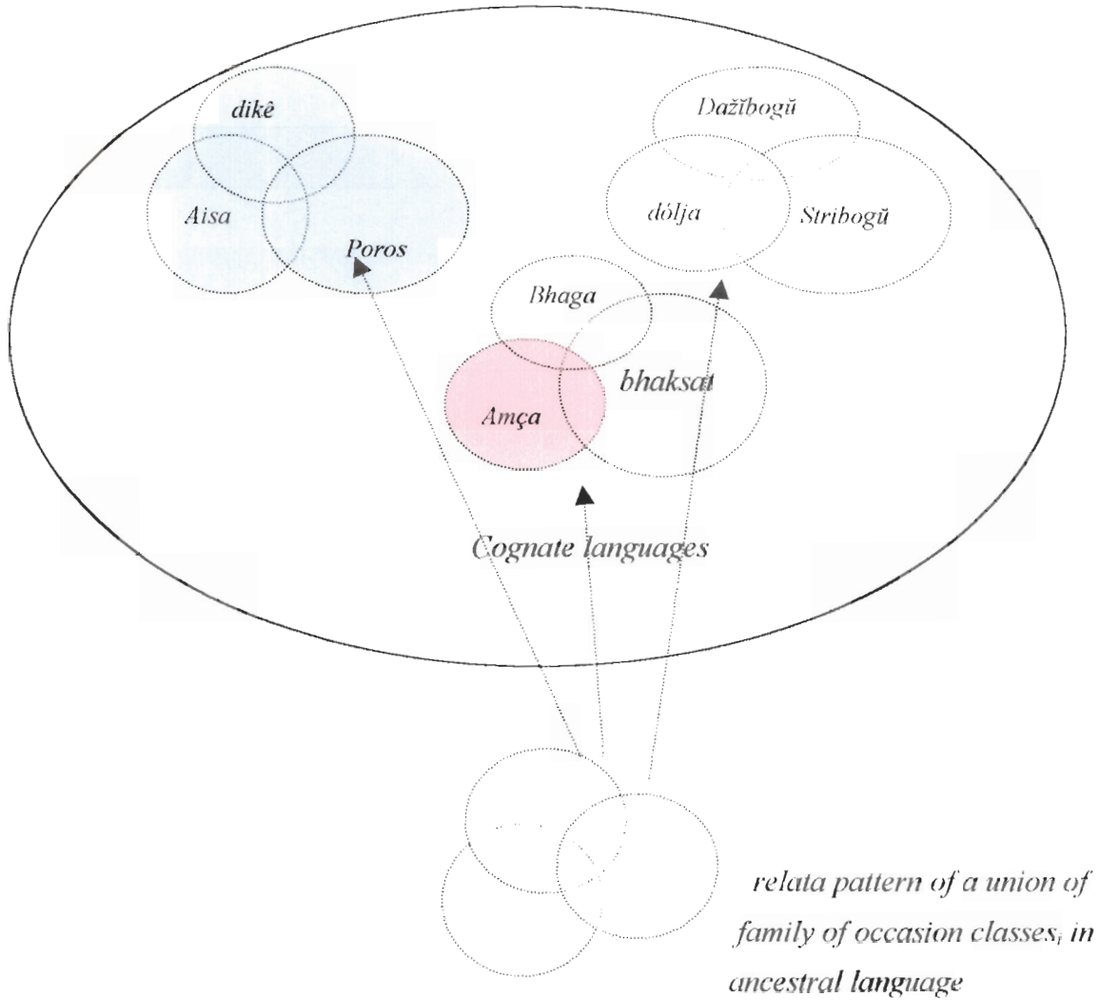
[217] Ibid.
[218] Ibid p.167.
[219] Palmer 1950 p.168.
[220] Ibid..

of a peculiar semantic structure within the Greek moral vocabulary, one that resembles the semantic structures of moral vocabularies in other cognate languages. From this he concludes that those vocabularies share a common ancestry. This conclusion, he claims, justifies his thesis respecting the Indo-European origins of Greek justice.

How are we to understand Palmer's notion, and use, of a *semantic structure*? Retaining my previous gloss on a *semantic field* as *family of occasion classes*, we can extensionally realize a *semantic structure* as the discernible, albeit complex, pattern of associations within a *union of families of occasion classes* that comprises the given vocabulary of a given conceptual field. Needless to say, in forming the union, each family brings with it all the family baggage. As with the notion of a *semantic field*, by way of an extensional realization, we can get some theoretical mileage out of Palmer's notion of a *semantic structure* in helping us understand our difficulties in recovering archaic understanding. We can also get a clear appreciation of the magnitude of the difficulties to be overcome.

Figure 2 graphically represents a two-dimensional extensional realization of Palmer's notion of a *semantic structure*:

Figure 2: ***Semantic structure***



Section 2: Response to Palmer

The main thrust of Palmer's argument is to the effect that the Greek language of justice evolved out of Indo-European origins. Although Palmer's evidence proceeds from rigorous scholarship, there can, of course, be no guarantee that his claim is correct. Nevertheless, no one who has read his article can now undertake to understand the ancient texts without taking into account his evidentiary considerations, and his methodological assumptions. Also, there must be few people whose reading of Platonic ethical thought would not be improved by reading his article on Greek justice. Further, any disagreement with him would surely have to be supported by studied reasons derived from a similar, or higher, standard of methodological care, and not by, or from, authority. The least that can be said is that Palmer deserves our attention if only for his challenging of those scholars who rely on phonology, translation and superficial etymology for their understanding of the ancient texts. There are, of course, other ways in which scholarly understanding can be sabotaged by superficial assumptions. I have previously discussed the dangers of falling into complacency when we unwarily rely on such 'false friends' as transliteration, translation and the current uses of anachronisms. Palmer's own cautionary remarks about translation are salutary.

With respect to his findings, Palmer, in developing the theoretical construct of a *semantic structure*, draws our attention to an interesting characteristic of language use, that is, that the constellation of social uses, or the conceptual field, of a vocabulary amongst users of one language corresponds to the constellation of social uses, or the conceptual field, of a vocabulary amongst users of cognate languages. A further characteristic of language that emerges from his investigation is that words have

dimensions that cannot be understood without an understanding of their connections to the dimensions of other words in the same conceptual field. Authors, particularly those in the formal, physical and medical sciences, sometimes display some understanding of these matters in their reversion to etymologically based uses when coining labels for morphisms, or in naming species, or for a range of technical applications: for example, in the biological and medical sciences respectively, we have the coinage of *ichthyology* and *ichthyosis* from the Greek *ichthus* (fish)

Clearly, we can, and do, use words without this degree of understanding. This raises the question as to what degree of understanding philosophers are prepared to settle for: enough understanding for conversational use of a word, or an increasingly greater degree of understanding as we make finer discriminations in the interconnectedness of the linguistic and social dimensions of that word? With his linguistic constructs of a *semantic field* and a *semantic structure*, Palmer has given us a way of making these finer discriminations, and, thus, resources for increasing our degree of understanding.

However, the significance that I draw from Palmer's evidence is incidental to the overall purpose of this particular article, whether that is to shed light on the *uses* of the word *dikê*, or on the conception of *dikê*. What I find significant is that his evidence points to some social use of language early in the evolution of the Indo-European family of languages that attests to a common ancestry. Further, that whatever structure such use had, its vocabular parts retained their original relationships within each member language as it evolved. There is no reason to suppose that the correspondence, as revealed by Palmer, between some cognate languages in the Indo-European family, would exist between languages that are not cognate. This suggests a principle of language that can be

construed as general and biological in character: that at some point in time, language acquired a use that coevolved with a social use, and that a vocabulary grew out of a common social history. That Palmer was alert to such a notion is suggested elsewhere:

> The social order is itself in the final instance...a construct of the pattern-making tendencies of the human mind, and it would be surprising if this did not show itself in the ways man talks about social institutions.[221]

We can suppose that, at their beginning, social arrangements were simple, and that, accordingly, the role of language was correspondingly simple. That is not to say that language was syntactically simpler, likely the reverse, but that it had less to do. We can also suppose that, within any particular language, the structure of the early social use of language reflected the early, shared social discriminations of its users, for example, the discriminations required in the making of tools, the commercial equivalences of goods, or the distinguishing of personal relations. Palmer himself gives examples of the vocabulary of different languages reflecting differences in colour discrimination, and differences in the designation of human relations according to discrete social and legal systems.[222] We can add that, in English at least, language is still associated with discrete sets of social relationships, for example, social class. That association is likely subtler than it was say, in the Greek language of the archaic period. English medieval society offers a striking illustration of the spread of languages mirroring the spread of social relations. There we find technical languages, distinct, and often genetically different, from one another and from the non-technical language, or vernacular, of the day, being used by discrete communities: for example, the French language of the Court and the Roman language of the Church, Academe and the Law. As social arrangements became more diffuse, these

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[221] Palmer 1972 p.194.
[222] Ibid p. 193.

distinct languages, through the natural processes of change in language use, became interfused with one another and with the vernacular, eventually forming the language of English, which, of course, continues to evolve.

We can also suppose the converse, that, in some measure, social arrangements reflect linguistic distinctions. The spread between technical language and the vernacular likely began at an early stage in the evolution of language as different communities evolved and refined linguistic innovations for their purposes. This would have led eventually to a spread in social relationships as each discrete technical community cohered around its technical language, effectively separating itself from other social groupings

Respecting their co-evolution, we know empirically that both language use and social order are subject to innovation. We have no way of determining, for any given epoch, the rate of change in either, since we have no common measure. However, because the rate of change in the discriminatory power of language is exponential, that is, the more distinction we have, the more we can make, then we ought to expect acceleration in the rate of linguistic innovation. Parallel remarks can be made about social relations. In both cases, there are, of course, changes in habitat that impose physical and social constraints on both the nature and the rate of innovation. One shared constraint is that the properties of an innovation can only emerge, through the naturally occurring processes of appropriation and exploitation, from what is already available. Innovation can also be constrained, or accelerated, by population bottlenecks. The introduction of media print and, later, mass media, have behaved functionally like a population bottleneck since they simultaneously exposed large numbers of people to the same

language, even same idiolect. Parallel remarks apply to the linguistic inbreeding that occurs within small and/or isolated and/or special interest communities. This can lead to special sub-languages within a language user group (rap, cockney), to jargon, dialect, accent, and, on a large scale, to a separate and distinct language. On the same theme, we can suppose that there was a preservation of the understanding of theoretical vocabulary by early Greek philosophers over time because of the bottleneck created by its limited and esoteric use, and by the tardiness of communication over large distances. Thus, it is a nice question whether Aristotle's understanding of the word *apeiron* would or would not have been far removed from that of Anaximenes, in spite of the temporal distance between them.

As to the connection between language and society, we can speculate that, whatever the relationship between linguistic innovation and social innovation, new linguistic exploitations can bring with them an increase in the efficiency and capacity of language to co-evolve with more complex social distinctions, and that, conversely, the innovation in social distinctions may mirror that of linguistics. At a certain level of understanding, we can take from Palmer's evidence the notion that inherited social relations match inherited linguistic relations. All of this would seem to suggest that none of us is perfectly autonomous in the way we see the world, and it may go some little way in explaining our difficulty in seeing the world as others sufficiently distant from us see it. For my smaller purpose, it may also help us explain our difficulty in recovering archaic understandings.

Section 3: Points of Commonality between Palmer and Steiner

Palmer and Steiner share a puzzlement of understanding: how to understand barriers to understanding, or, as I refer to it, intellectual difficulty. Steiner, of course, is explicit in declaring his puzzlement. Palmer, on the other hand, states his more obliquely. We can, he says, appeal to the evidence of words for insights into the past; however, this same evidence can create difficulty, and itself be a barrier to understanding. Although they use a common mentalist vocabulary, they bring quite different resources to bear on the subject, so that it would be difficult to fuse them into a unified approach to philosophical difficulty. Nevertheless, they have some commonalities that would be useful to consider as a way into the problem. Since Steiner ranges over a wide canvas of literature, discussing language in broad brush strokes, it would seem less unwieldy to pursue these considerations through the more straitened lens of Palmer's investigative reach.

In the first place, both scholars locate the source of their puzzlement in language, particularly, in the relationship of language to its context, although each constitutes that context differently. At a more specific level, Steiner's discussion of modal difficulties resonates with Palmer's assertion that a word's meaning is circumscribed by the context of its occurrence. He would subscribe to Palmer's standard of investigation with respect to that context, but would likely hedge his claims. For Palmer, a word's context is its semantic context, one that can be understood through rigorous etymological analysis of text; for Steiner, it is the 'whole ambient world'[223]. Steiner would argue that, even if, theoretically, we could, at the cerebral level, intellectually grasp that context, our insensibility of the circumstances would remain intact because of our sensible distance

[223] Steiner 1980. p. 26.

from the 'idioms and order of apprehension (that) are no longer natural to us'[224]. Steiner would further caution that, given the obstacles strewn in our path by a writer's 'tactics', even after the most rigorous analysis of any feature of its context, there can be no guarantee that our intellectual grasp of the meaning or significance of a word's occurrence is correct. One further note of commonality: Palmer and Steiner both posit polysemy as a morass that can pose a barrier to understanding. However, Palmer's approach to it is much subtler than Steiner's. For Palmer, the morass can be explored as a semantic field of associative possibilities whilst Steiner seems stuck in the language of 'multiplicity of meanings'.

The notion of a word having many meanings alerts both men to the vagaries and unreliability of translation. Indeed, Palmer's article is motivated by what he construes as an error of translation. They would agree that translation is often a controversial act in which one meaning is chosen to the neglect of others for a variety of reasons, ranging from politics to sloth. They would also agree, presumably, that translation has the potential to perpetuate misunderstanding, and, thus, to aggravate our difficulties.

In the chapter that follows, I present two case studies that are illustrative of these worries, and of intellectual difficulty generally: the language of *logos* and the language of *cause*. In the case of *logos*, I describe, without presuming to have anything near the informational resources of Palmer, something like an account of the semantic field, or family of occasion classes, of the vocable *logos*. In the case of *cause*, I offer an illustration of what can happen when the considerations adduced by Palmer are disregarded.

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[224] Steiner. 1980 p.33 (*Brackets mine*).

CHAPTER 4: TWO CASE STUDIES

Preamble

These case studies of the respective languages of *logos* and *cause* are presented as stark illustrations, or what even may be construed as evidence, of:

a. The difficulty of the task of recovering archaic understanding.

b. The speculative nature of the lexical record

c. An apparent fact that novel uses of vocabulary by theorists emerge (1) in response to intellectual predicament and (2) out of received language

These case studies are *not* an attempt at a philosophical analysis of the words, or the concepts of, *logos* and *cause*.

Case 1: The Language of *Logos*

If language in general is a physical phenomenon, then so too is the language of *logos*. As such, it is subject to the constraints imposed by the physical facts of both linguistic transmission and of language change. It follows that the best understanding of the word *logos* (or of any other naturally occurring vocabulary) that anyone can count *a priori* upon obtaining is whatever level of understanding is guaranteed by the transmission of the language from one generation of users to the next, at its current rate of change. Where that transmission has reoccurred over many generations in the distant past, the task of recovering original understandings is a well nigh hopeless one. This case study of *logos* is presented as a striking illustration of the difficulties. Indeed, that there is a difficulty

was made manifest at a recent conference dedicated to *The Logos* .[225] A survey of its published papers quickly reveals that each presenter, like the members of the Mellstock choir, sang to his own tune. Some presented it (in similarly difficult language) as a mystical definiteness[226], some as denoting the human intellect[227], still others as the dialectic[228]. A causal history of *logos* can perhaps go some way in explaining this. To be clear, the history is presented as an approach to understanding the difficulty, not as any philosophical analysis of the concept of, or the word, *logos*. For reasons already given, the history can be no more than interpretative. Its evidentiary standards are severely compromised by ancient and fragmented data. In addition, I, like many other philosophers, do not bring to the task the informational resources of a Palmer. What I can do, however, is to be circumspect in the treatment of my philosophical resources, and to operate within proportionate standards of intellectual uncertainty.

(i) The English record

In its current English usage, the term '*logos*' is used only to reference a concept in ancient Greek philosophy and in Christian theology. There are, of course, many English derivatives in use, among them the suffix *–logy*, and the words *logic, logistics, logo* and *legal*. The Modern Greek λόγος is put, as in ancient times, to a variety of uses in a variety of environments, among them, as denoted in English: *word, saying, mention, rumour,*

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[225] Boudouris, K.I. (ed.) 1996. *The Philosophy of Logos Vols.1 & 2*. Athens: International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture.
[226] Hager, F.P. 1996. Some Problems of the Logos-Theology in Philo, Plotinus and Proclus and the Christian Conception. In Boudouris, K.I. (ed.) *The Philosophy of Logos Vols.1*. Athens: International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture p.91-109.
[227] Santos, J.G.T. 1996 Knowledge and the Forms. In Boudouris, K.I. (ed.) *The Philosophy of Logos Vols.2*. Athens: International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture p.174-179.
[228] Boudouris, K.I The Dialectic of Logos. In Boudouris, K.I ed.) 1996. *The Philosophy of Logos Vols.1*. Athens: International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture p 68-75.

cause, reason, purpose, explanation, account, promise, ratio and proportion.[229] It is of some interest that not only did the vocable λογοσ flourish in correspondingly diverse ancient conversational settings, but also that it came to assume significance within the vocabulary of Western philosophy and religion, culminating in, whatever its significance, John's pronouncement, *'En archê ên o logos'*[230]

(ii) The ancient record

The record of the past 3,000 years, slim and fragile as it is at its ancient beginnings, tells us that, during certain periods within that long reach of time, the vocable *logos* found its way, sometimes with great force, into an assortment of conversational and theoretical environments, that is, its occasion classes was densely populated. From this historical and linguistic distance, it is impossible to provide a reliable account of its meandering paths; however, such evidence as remains allows the lexicographers to give a conjectural, and sometimes plausible, account. My presentation of that account will proceed along two intertwining trails, (a) the word use itself, asking the question, 'what was it about the vocable *logos* that seemed to make it a candidate for appropriation to a particular use?' and (b) the conversational environment into which *logos* is supposed to have been appropriated, now asking the question, 'what was the conversation about?' As I have insisted, we cannot recover with any guarantee the conversational understanding of a linguistic expression beyond one generation. However, we can examine the use to which a given word is supposed to have been put, and, playing along with the lexicographers for

[229] Collins. 1977. *Collins Contemporary Greek Dictionary*. London: Collins. p.90.
[230] *Greek New Testament On-line*. John 1:1 (http://www.users.cs..york.as.uk/~fisher/cgi-bin/gnt?id=0401) accessed December 2, 2006.

the moment, we can assume with some confidence that the speakers in a given conversation knew how to use that word for conversational effect within its range.

Guthrie tells us that *logos* was one of the more common words used by the Greeks.[231] Liddell and Scott have collapsed its uses across the ancient centuries into ten general categories[232]:

> Computation, reckoning, account of money handled
> Settling of accounts, paying the penalty
> Relation, correspondence, proportion, value, esteem, measure, ratio
> Explanation, definition, law, argument, inward debate, thinking, reflection
> Reason, continuous statement, narrative, story, fable
> Verbal expression, utterance, anything said, report, discussion, a particular utterance, proverb, saying
> Thing spoken of, subject matter, plot of a drama
> Language, modes of expression, parts of speech, sentence
> The word or wisdom of God

These, of course, represent successive lexical discriminations as understood by Liddell and Scott, and made by them on our behalf. We have no way of knowing whether these were the discriminations made by the ancients. Nor can the lexicographers tell us whether the uses were technical, conversational, colloquial or argotic. Semantic explanations for such a varied use of *logos* may suggest that the notions denoted by the vocable were closely linked 'in the minds of' its speakers, meaning, we can suppose, conceptually linked.[233] A physical account of the multiple uses of *logos*, however, would instead propose that the vocable had been successfully appropriated, for a range of uses, into novel conversational environments whilst retaining vestiges of its earlier effects and, at the same time, losing some earlier lexical uses. Indeed, it would expect that in some uses

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[231] Guthrie 1988 p.419.
[232] Liddell λόγος sv.
[233] Guthrie 1988 pp. 38, 424.

it might play no greater role than the vocable 'god' plays in the expletive 'good god!' where it denotes no theological notion, least of all a notion of divinity.

According to Liddell and Scott, *logos* can be picked out first in Hesiod as the verbal noun form of *lego,* with a use approximating that of the English *count, tell, talk, say, speak.*[234] Earlier, *lego* can be found in Homer with two voices: the active, *pick up, gather for oneself, pick out, choose, picking out stones for building walls,* and, in the passive, *to be chosen, count, tell, I reckoned myself, I was counted among these, recount, tell over*[235]. At the time of Homer, then, the classicists have discerned two general uses of λόγος *viz. picking out stones* and *anything said.* It is generally supposed that the former use was the first.[236] One theory for its use as *anything said* suggests that the notion of 'picking out' was applied to the 'picking out' of or selection of vocables in talking.[237] I would propose another possible, and equally speculative, explanation: that is, that the selecting of stones individuated stones according to their capacity, in virtue of size and shape, to play a highly specific role. This proposal has some support in that the history of the vocable *logos* shows evidence of a long association between its use as *anything said* and various notions of *computation.* Be that as it may, if the lexicographers are right about the Homeric uses of vocabulary of *logos* , a biology of language perspective would predict a branching structure in its future use emerging from its two taproots in Homer, where later branches exploited earlier incidental features of use, and not always the same incidental features.

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[234] Liddell λεγο *sv.*
[235] Ibid.
[236] Ibid.
[237] Robinson, Thomas. The Self-Expression of the Real Logos in Heraclitus, Plato and the Author of the Fourth Gospel. In Boudouris, K (ed.) *The Philosophy of Logos. Vol.1* Athens. International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture p.182.

The lexicographers next find *logos* in Pythagoras with the following uses; *anything said, conversation, ratio, and relation*[238]. Liddell and Scott cite one of its Pythagorean use as *ratio.*[239] Guthrie, however, disputes this use although acknowledging that, given Aristotle's account of his work, it would be difficult to believe that Pythagoras did not use *logos* approximately as later theorists used *relation* and *ratio.*[240] Whether *logos* was appropriated by Pythagoras to some explanatory arithmetic task, or whether *logos* was part of his received vocabulary of arithmetic, can only be a matter of speculation since, according to Guthrie, the evidence, is inconclusive as to whether he used the word for *ratio* at all. Liddell and Scott show no record of the use of *logos* in the intervening centuries since Hesiod.

In Xenophanes, according to Liddell and Scott, *logos* denotes a *tale*, a *story* as in false or fictitious.[241] By the time of Heraclitus, '*logos*' is seen as multi-tasking across several ancient Greek conversational genres. Guthrie has compiled the following list of its fifth-century uses: *anything said, report, account, deceptive talk, reputation, thought, cause, reason, measure, correspondence* and *proportion.*[242] Liddell and Scott would add *worth, esteem, statement of theory* and *argument* to its fifth century uses.[243] There is some conjecture that *logos* may have been used in this period as *law* and the *faculty of reason,* but Guthrie is suspicious of the supporting evidence; he suggests that the conversational understanding may have been no more than *spoken reason, the ground for*

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[238] Liddell *λόγος sv* & Guthrie 1988 p. 420.
[239] Ibid λόγος sv.
[240] Guthrie 1988 p.424ff.
[241] Liddell λόγος sv.
[242] Guthrie 1988 p. 420 ff.
[243] Liddell λόγος sv.

or *a saying*.[244] However, the lexicographers claim that there is evidence that Heraclitus appropriated a conversational use of *logos* , and used it in such a way that suggests an English translation as *principle* and *law*.[245]

Now, as with all translation, we need to be wary about Guthrie's claims, and those of Liddell and Scott. Certainly, '*logos*' appears in a range of conversational environments, and lexicographers are tempted to translate it into a range of English conversational environments. But these are the lexicographer's discriminations. It may both be going too far, and yet not far enough, to say that the word meant different things in different places. It may be that it was used in many of these cases without discrimination. Further, we cannot surmount the barrier in trying to understand what inhibiting influence this fact of the matter exercised over Heraclitus's theorizing. We don't, and cannot, know the degree of specificity of his intention, or meaning, in his use of *logos*. He may have been talking loosely. He may have been exploiting some feature of one of its common uses; it could just as well have been argotic. We cannot know. These remarks apply also to the remainder of the case history, and the future philosophical deployments of *logos* that were yet to come.

In Parmenides, the use of *logos* is seen as restricted to such notions as *discourse, deliberation, reflection* and *true account*.[246] However, by fourth century BCE, the record shows the, "...multiformity, polyvalency and multifacetedness of the *logos* "[247], a phenomenon reflected in the works of both Plato and Aristotle. Thus, in Plato, it is

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[244] Guthrie 1988 p.423.
[245] Ibid. p. 428.
[246] Liddell λόγος sv.
[247] Boudouris, K.I. 1996. The Dialectic of Logos in *The Philosophy of Logos Vols.1* Athens. International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture p. 76.

translated variously as: *reckoning, account, measure, worth, esteem, proportion, ratio, similarity, parity of reasoning, plea, explanation, thesis, hypothesis, utterance of an oracle, dialogue, reason, inward debate, idea thought, speech, tale, reason as a faculty, law, rule, description, formula, complete statement, sentence;* and in Aristotle*: an account of the cause, proportion, ratio, plea, case, argument, proposition in logic, rule, law principle, definition, formula, idea, thought, discursive reasoning, oration, dialogue, particular utterance, speech.*[248] To these uses, it is generally accepted that the Stoics added *intelligible utterance, divine order* and *the generative principle.* [249]

As I understand it, this is the extent of the readily available record. For it to be a causal history requires a contextual examination of that evidence, that is, it needs to address the questions, what were the conversations about into which the vocable *logos* is supposed to have been appropriated, what were the circumstances of its occasions of use? And what previous uses made it a plausible candidate for appropriation? Given our temporal and linguistic distance, such an examination is highly problematic the conversations of early users must ground any such inquiry. However, I will venture some interpretative remarks that, though conjectural, are consciously so. I will consider three conversational environments in which the word '*logos*' is generally supposed to have been in play. They can be broadly described as those of the marketplace, of the narrative, and of philosophy.[250] I am not suggesting that there was a discrete use of *logos* particular to each of these environments; if we accept extensionally Palmer's notion of semantic fields, then it is more likely that it had overlapping occasion classes. Further,

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[248] Liddell λὀγος sv.
[249] Ibid.
[250] We might find parallels with Germanic relationships between 'tell' and 'teller' in their narrative and mercantile uses.

understanding language as a physical phenomenon, we can predict that those uses, and their relation to the uses of any associative terms, were continually subjected to selective pressures. By showing some evidence, as conjectural as that is, that *logos* was put to a variety of uses, I am merely pointing to the complexity of the task of attempting to grasp what the ancient philosophers understood themselves to be saying when they used the term.

I will go first to the marketplace as an opportune environment for the early appropriation of *logos* into the language of exchange, standards and value.

(iii) Conversational environments

a). Mercantile talk

The mercantile activities of property exchange and management require a vocabulary with which to talk about what should be traded for what; goods need to be assigned a value, or worth, according to some locally standard measurement. Initially, that measurement would have been informal and, for itinerant traders, chaotic, driven by individual and local needs and resources; eventually, it would have become standardized with the establishment of a common currency (of course, the informal economy persists to this day). Such activities, however, need more than language; they need a number system with which to compute value. I offer now, as a structural illustration of the concept of intellectual predicament, a reconstruction of what might have been the case with respect to the use of *logos*.

What is it reasonable to suppose went on in primitive marketplaces? There mathematic transactions would have been crude and physical. They would have consisted

of no more than the 'picking up' or random selection of stones, or some such markers, and placing them in some form that would incrementally record the lots being counted, essentially no more than what a cricket umpire does to track overs. Just as the use of the builder's square obviates mastery of trigonometry, such physical transactions require no arithmetic or enumeration skills. The only information preserved by the transaction is that the number of stones in the form corresponds to the number of lots. Although minimal, this information has the incidental feature that certain kinds of information are inaccessible. These would have been salient to the discerning, contemplative mind. To list some: the stones would have no individuating information as markers, when the transaction is completed they go back to being stones: they are not selected in any predetermined order, and the actual order of their selection is not recorded: the transaction is ephemeral; there is no record of its result, or even of it ever having taken place. We can find this kind of inaccessible information preserved in the branching uses of *logos:* for example, the idea of *logos* as a kind of selection, and as fate. Now, there is no reason to suppose that a more contemplative person would have immediately differentiated the various kinds of information that I've listed. Someone with the leisure to notice and ponder them may still not have had a sufficiently sophisticated language with which to make the discriminations. These would have been features of his intellectual predicament. I have given this structural illustration as an account of the general processes that one might hypothesis, and as a way of getting concretely at an intellectual predicament. Whether it applies, of course, one cannot say.

The references tell us that, at a later stage, in the marketplaces of the ancient world, the only system available for computation would have been a simple arithmetic

derived from the activity of counting (*logos)* utensil-money.[251] We know that by the seventh century BCE, notions of equivalency of value and ratio had emerged from the marketplace.[252] By the time of Pythagoras, these would have been established mercantile notions. As I noted earlier, the commentators can only speculate as to whether Pythagoras received or appropriated *logos* as a mathematical vocable, or whether he even used the word in any mathematical application. However, it would seem reasonable to assume that the language of counting (*logos)* would have found a place in the conversations of merchants when assigning value to goods, and that the vocable *logos* would have had its genesis as denoting value, worth and measure in those conversations. It can be conjectured from this distance that its appropriation into Pythagorean conversations about abstract numbers, if it did occur, would be a predictable eventuality.

The marketplace is rife with chatter about 'deals', both good and bad, about fair and unfair business practices, true and false reporting, accountability, discounts, product quality, value inflation and the relative worthiness of products. The appropriation of the vocable *logos* into conversations concerned with non-monetary valuing, for example, those concerned with the appraisal of human character and conduct, or with the critical appreciation of a story as true or false, may have exploited the effects of its use in the world of commerce. Xenophanes use of it as *tale* could have been, perhaps, just such an exploitation, conflating for effect the two evolutionary streams of *logos :* 'anything said' and 'value'.

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[251] Stecchini, Livio Catullo. 1946. *The Origin of Money in Greece*. Doctoral Dissertation. Harvard University. (http://www.metrum.org/money/synopsis.htm) accessed August 14, 2006.
[252] Ibid.

The Pythagorean record with respect to the use of *logos* may be controversial, however, that of Heraclitus seems more settled. Caution, however, is still required since that record is sparse and fragmented. Further, the interpretative difficulties are increased by the obscurity of Heraclitus' paradoxical, aphoristic and oracular style, although one can hazard that such may not have been his style, but merely an artefact of the fragmentary nature of the record! Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that Heraclitus was the first Greek speaker to put the language of *logos* to metaphysical use. His physical theory of the harmony of opposites, as realized by a continuous motion and exchange governed by law like principles, involved theoretical concepts of value, standard, measure, ratio and relation and, presumably, universality. I can suppose that today's physical theorists would realize these concepts in mathematical models. However, Heraclitus could rely only upon natural language to do that explanatory work. In appropriating *logos* it seems fair to assume that he exploited the mercantile effects of value, exchange and standard, and then proceeded to universalise and formalize the notion of standard as a permanent principle of universal law. It is in some such way, I hazard, that the vocable *logos* entered into intellectual and formal language, far removed from its roots and fragmented use in the daily wrangling of the marketplace. However, another exploitative step was required. In associating λόγος as a standard with the notion of law, Heraclitus would have exploited its effects in a different conversation, that of the narrative. We can suppose that the evolutionary journey of *logos* along its mercantile path would continue, and, at some point would become, inevitably, an integral part of the narrative language of mathematics.

b). Narrative talk

If the etymologists are correct, *logos* has been used in 'talk' talk since its recorded beginnings. In Hesiod, it is posited as having been used to denote *anything said.* By the time of Pythagoras, it had been appropriated to refer to the context of saying, that is, conversation. As I noted previously with respect to Xenophanes, it is conjectured that it came to be used as *tale* and *story.* In the record of Heraclitus' contemporaries, we are asked to witness an explosion of its narrative uses that, together with its mercantile uses, would have required a rich array of cues to secure the intended uptake. One of the prevailing uses of *logos*, as supposed by the references, denoted *thought* and *reflection,* derived, it is suggested, from some notion of inner talk. If so, this may have opened up new possibilities for exploitation having to do with the processes and products of thought such as spoken reason and argument, leading eventually to its metaphysical use by Heraclitus as *law* and *principle*, and, by Parmenides, as *discourse* and *true account.* We may interpret the last of these as exploitation by Parmenides of both the mercantile and the narrative effects of *logos.* Again, we can assume that the evolution of its use in narrative talk would continue and, it can be supposed, spawn uses such as *rumour, gossip, report* and *fiction.*[253]

c.) Philosophy talk

There is agreement amongst the classicists that Parmenides and those Greek philosophers who followed him had a received use of *logos* in the language of ideas as denoting *reason, argument, theory, law* and *principle.* Therefore, its supposed use by the Stoics to denote an ontological principle can hardly be characterized as an appropriation. Rather, it

[253] Liddell *λόγος* sv.

was their endowment of such a law with corporeality and divinity that, perhaps, marked a revolutionary change in the use of *logos*. I hazard, however, that that endowment did involve an act of appropriation, but that the direction of the appropriation was from the language of philosophy into the language of divination.

Sambursky has noted that the Stoics relied on the field of divination to provide a scientific base for their thesis of determinism.[254] Unable to express that base in precise mathematical language, we can suppose that they turned to what they, perhaps, thought to be the most precise language available to them, that of philosophy. By appropriating the term λόγος with its effects of law, order, exchange, language and explanation, into 'scientific' enquiry, the Stoics, we may be presume, set the stage for an explanatory investigation centred on a single, all pervasive, eternal, governing and regulatory principle, or law, of motion and exchange that explains itself in its own language, and, when merged with Stoic doctrine of corporeality of matter, takes on corporeal form.

Perhaps. Clearly, the word '*logos*' offers a goldmine for speculators. What we can say with some safety is that the use of *logos,* in its evolving iterations, continued as part of the scientific explanatory narrative until the establishment of sufficiently powerful mathematical models in the early modern era. Indeed, in some quarters, the word '*logos*' as *'word'* continues to play a role in the explanatory narrative of the physical world.

I once more issue the caveat that we cannot have a satisfactorily certain understanding of what the Stoics, or those philosophers before them, understood themselves to be talking about when they used *logos*. I have presented this case study, or something like an account of the evolving semantic field, or the occasion classes, of the

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[254] Sambursky, S.1959.*Physics of the Stoics*. London. Routledge and Kegan Paul.p.65ff.

vocable *logos* as an illustration of the central concepts of my thesis: linguistic innovation and intellectual predicament. I have not attempted an etymological analysis of *logos* by introducing, as Palmer does, its associative vocables. That would have been beyond the scope and purpose of this thesis, and certainly beyond my informational resources. I can only reflect that such an analysis would probably reveal even more difficulties than I have contemplated in this simple account of the lexical record. However, any claim to having recovered an archaic understanding of the use of *logos* would seem, at the least, to warrant such an effort. And even then, given the facts of language change and the general worries attending etymological analysis, some uncertainty would still seem to be called for. Neither has this been an attempt at a philosophical analysis of the word, or concept, *logos*. What we can suppose, given the notion of *discontinuity of effect*, is that the effects of its use by Heraclitus would have been different from those of its use by Plato, which again would have been different from those of its use by Chyrissipus, as would its family of occasion classes be different in each time period. Any satisfactory philosophical analysis would probably need to discriminate the archaic effects and occasion classes. Clearly, '*logos*' is a vocable that is threaded throughout the ancient philosophical record, an indication, we can only suppose, that it was valued for its discursive effects. The generality of its use and effects may well have been its allure. If so, that can only add to the difficulty of the task of recovering an archaic understanding of its particular use by any one of the ancient philosophers.

Case 2: The Language of *Cause*

In what follows, I offer, through a series of standard interpretations of the data, one account of how the vocable *cause* has become divested of almost all its lexical or usefully informational content, something that may possibly explain our difficulty when using it philosophically. The fact that what follows can be no more than interpretative underscores the difficulty. The case study is also given as an illustration of what can happen when the considerations of translation adduced by Palmer are disregarded.

Germane to any discussion of the aetiology of our difficulty with the language of *cause* is the occasion of the first appearance of *causa* in the argot of Roman philosophical discourse as a suitable translation of Aristotle's *aition*. We will look later at the details. But first I will ask why Roman scholars believed that they had the right word in *causa* ready to hand. In order to answer that question, I must address a further question: why did Aristotle choose the language of *aition* to name the four items in his ontology of the world that we usually translate in English as: the formal cause, the material cause, the efficient cause, and the final cause. Clearly, his use of the language of *aition* was considerably broader than today's English technical uses of the language of *cause*. This has led some current Aristotelian scholars to question whether the word *cause* is the appropriate English term for Aristotle's four items.[255] However, I am not asking what we should call them in English. Rather, my interest is in what Aristotle took himself to be calling them by appropriating the language of *aition* for technical use. To satisfy that interest adequately, I would have to do at least what Palmer does. Once more, that, of

[255] Guthrie, W.K.C. 1981. *A History of Greek Philosophy Vol.VI*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. p.223.

course, is beyond the scope of this work. The most that I can do is to refer to the lexicographers, bearing in mind all the worries of such a strategy.

From what follows, it is fair to say, in general, that Aristotle appropriated the word *aition* from its more social deployments to label the factors that, as he supposed, had to be accounted for in scientific explanations of natural phenomena. But his adoption was just that: an appropriation.

(i) The language of *aition*

Greek-English references translate *aition* as *responsibility* mostly in environments in which notions of guilt or blame are also in play.[256]. Guthrie claims that its use to describe the notion of *responsibility for* was established before Aristotle.[257] Its use, on this account, would point to the language of morality or human agency. Our difficulty now becomes the avoidance of looking on these English words *(responsibility, guilt, blame)* as though we understand them. I would argue that we understand the inherited language of, for example, *responsibility* no better than we understand the inherited language of *cause*. In order to understand our use of *responsibility* better, we must subject it to the same kind of study as the one to which we are now subjecting *cause*. The connection between *responsibility,* (or the Anglo-Saxon *answerability*[258]) and *blame* (a reduced form of *blaspheme*) likewise requires such a study. I cannot conduct it here. But, when selecting a translation, we may be sure that the lexicographers were not asking any such philosophically interesting question, and we already know enough to cast doubt upon the propriety of citing *responsibility* in an explication of *aition.* The latter word has its own

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[256] Liddell *aition sv.*
[257] Guthrie 198. p. 223.
[258] Brown. Vol. 2 *answerability sv.*

history: there is no reason to suppose that that history paralleled that of the word *responsibility*, or that there was, in Aristotle's Greek, any word whose use even vaguely corresponded, except perhaps in degree of vagueness, to the modern use of *responsibility*.

The most I can say is that it seems that, in its general uses, the language of *aition* had human origins, and had to do with human conditions that occasioned events. Whether the non-human instances are generalizations of that or particularizations of more general uses is unclear, but it may take us closer to understanding Aristotle's appropriation of the language of *aition* if we preserved contact with the notion of human authorship rather than that of human answerability. We cannot, of course, be sure of that because we do not understand what *cause* is except as a general classification of physical relations.

(ii) Hume and the language of *cause*

The problem of Aristotle and *aition* is only the beginning of our difficulties with the language of *cause*. Two millennia later, we encounter Hume and his reflections on causation. Now, there is no evidence that Aristotle had any difficulty in using the language of *aition*. This is not the case with Hume. Indeed, his difficulty with the language of *cause* seems to motivate much of the *Enquiry*. It is worthwhile asking what kind of a problem Hume thought that there was. It would not, perhaps, be too far off the mark to suggest that our attitude towards what Hume understood to be the problem has been somewhat coloured by the Kantian approach to it. On that view, for Hume the puzzle of *cause* is a puzzle concerning the human intellect. He comes to the Kantian realization that *cause* is an idea that humans impose upon the world, and, further, that that idea corresponds to the way we're bound to see things because of the structure of human intellect. However, in the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, Hume says subtly different things,

characterizing his difficulty with *cause* in a variety of ways. Indeed, we cannot be clear about how Hume himself uses the word. He is imprecise as to whether he is using it to denote a state of affairs or a physical property. Compare the following two quotations from *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*:

> (i) [if] that object be entirely new to him, he will not be able, by the most accurate examination of its sensible qualities, to discover any of its causes or effects.[259]
>
> (ii) In a word, then, every effect is a distinct event from its cause.[260]

On one thing he was certain, that the vocabulary of *cause* is not observational vocabulary. But what kind of vocabulary it is puzzled him. Although he did not characterize it as such, or pursue a linguistic methodology in his investigation, Hume seems to have regarded the problem of *cause* as a linguistic one, as he sought to explain the circumstances of its use. I believe that we would have his sympathy if we were to ask how the vocabulary of *cause* is problematic, and to say something about the aetiology of the problem.

(iii) The language of *cause*

The word *cause*, in the uses of it that baffled Hume, entered the English vernacular in the fourteenth century from the Latin *causa* of medieval philosophers and lawyers. It has retained to this day many of the lexical uses that, according to the references, *causa* had for those worthies, *viz. on account of, through which any thing takes place or is done, a cause, a reason, a motive, inducement, an occasion, opportunity, to be the cause of, responsible, just cause, good reason, the first part of the process, that which lies at the*

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[259] Beauchamp p.109.
[260] Ibid. p. 111.

basis of a rhetorical representation, a condition, a state, situation, relation and position.[261] Also, *judicial proceedings, a legal case, a ground of action, a causal* or *metaphysical principle, a causal agency, origin, history,* and, *on behalf of*[262]. Therefore, in its nominal and verbal forms, the word *cause* was polysemous even at its entry point into English, inheriting the range of uses of the polysemous Latin *causa.* Once released into its new linguistic environment, *cause* became subject to local linguistic pressures. For example, first joining with the preposition 'by' to form the subordinator, 'by the cause that', it then suffered morphological reduction with the general ellipsis of 'that' in the English language, eventually becoming the subordinator 'because'[263]; further morphological reduction has yielded 'cos', the universal solvent of adolescent explanation.

The word *cause* soon became established as an item in English philosophical vocabulary. This was to be expected since Roman and early medieval scholars had used the Latin *causa* to translate Aristotle's Greek *aition.* Predictably, *cause* became, and remains, the English word used to translate *aition.*[264] Whether or not *cause* can continue to be a useful English translation of *aition* is a matter of some controversy, given some of our current assumptions of causality that were not at work in Aristotle's use of *aition*, nor in his early translators' understanding of *causa* and *cause.*[265]

Present understandings of *cause* stem mainly from the seventeenth-century scientific revolution, which was, in some measure, a reaction to an Aristotelian account

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[261] Lewis *causa* & *OED cause sv.*
[262] Glare, P.G. W. 1985 *The Oxford Latin Dictionary.* Oxford: Clarendon Press causa sv.
[263] *OED because* sv.
[264] Guthrie 1981. p.223.
[265] Ibid.

of the natural order. The new scientific paradigm postulated an ordered, mechanistic universe with hidden forces and regulating laws. Understood as a force within this worldview, *cause* became a philosophical *cause célèbre,* a subject of enquiry, or a problem, amongst English-speaking philosophers and scientists. Locke sought to explain *cause* as a power or an agency, albeit hidden from human sensory experience, that necessarily brings something about.[266] As noted earlier, Hume recognized that the vocabulary of cause could not be used to describe his observations of the physical world,[267] and puzzled over what it did describe. The English translators of Descartes used *cause* to translate his seventeenth-century use of the Latin *causa.* Descartes uses *causa* to describe a power, a something or other, that brings something else into being.[268] However, in his correspondence with Elisabeth of Bohemia, he had no easy time stilling her persistent anxieties ("...excuse my stupidity in being unable to comprehend..." [269]), regarding the *nature* of a causal relationship between soul and body.

The difficulties faced by each of these philosophers in explaining *cause* may have derived from the nature of their enquiries. They approached its usage variously as either a problem of the external world or as one of mind; no one in the seventeenth century seems to have considered, or pursued, it as a problem of language. That is, the use of the vocable *cause* in sentences does not give us any specific information, other than temporal, about the nature of the transaction between events or states that *cause* or are *caused*; nor does it tell us much about the events and objects themselves. The

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[266] Locke, John. (1967) *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.* Oxford: Clarendon Press. p.180.
[267] Steinberg pp.40 & 50.
[268] Descartes, Rene. (2003) First published 1641. *Meditations On First Philosophy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.28.
[269] Blom, John J. (1978) *Descartes: His Moral Philosophy and Psychology.* New York: New York University Press. p. 111.

informational deficiency of *cause* can be illustrated by comparing the statements, 'my braking causes the car to stop' and, 'my braking stops the car'. We may have inherited the informational deficiency from the Romans along with the word.

(iv) The language of *causa*

That medieval scholars had inherited a polysemous *causa* is reflected in Roman philosophical and judicial literature. In classical Latin, *causa* seems to have been used either as a reference to *reason* as in motivation or inducement, or in the judicial senses of *a cause to be defended*, or *the first part of a trial*.[270] Both uses survived into medieval times, and, of course, survive to this day. Roman examples may be found in Aurelius and Cicero. According to modern English translators, the Roman translators of Marcus Aurelius, a Roman writing in Greek, used *causa* to denote *reason* as in *for what reason* or *why*, and *for the sake of*:

> [quam] ob causam quis suspectam habeat omnium rerum mutationem et in partes dissolutionem?[271]
>
> ([*why*] *should a man have any apprehension about the change and dissolution of all the elements?*[272])

And:

> Perpendens decretum illud, animalium ratione praeditorium alterum alterius causa natum [esse][273]
>
> (*Recall to thy mind this conclusion, that rational animals exist for one [another]*[274])

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[270] Lewis *causa sv.*
[271] Aurelius, Marcus. 2003 *Meditations.* Book 2:17 <http://www.slu.edu/colleges/ AS/languages/ classical/latin/ tchmat/pedagogy/latinitas/ma/index.htm> accessed August 14, 2006.
[272] Long, George 1993. The *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius.* New York: Avon. p.15.
[273] Aurelius Book 4:3.
[274] Long 1993. p. 22.

A similar use of *causa* as reason can be found in the works of Cicero:

> Verum ego hoc, quod iam pridem factum esse oportuit, certa de causa nondum adducor ut faciam.[275]
>
> (*But yet this, which ought to have been done long since, I have good reason for not doing as yet*[276])

And:

> Dixi ego idem in senatu caedem te optumatium contulisse in ante diem V Kalendas Novembris, tum cum multi principes civitatis Roma non tam sui conservandi quam tuorum consiliorum reprimendorum causa profugerunt.[277]
>
> (*I said also in the senate that you had fixed the massacre of the nobles for the 28th of October when many chief men of the senate had left Rome not so much for the sake of saving themselves as of checking your designs.*[278])

In Boethius, a Roman philosopher writing four centuries after Aurelius, we find *causa* used to correspond to Aristotle's material cause:

> Tu causis animas paribus uitasque minores
> prouehis et leuibus sublimes curribus aptans
> in caelum terramque seris quas lege benigna
> ad te conuersas reduci facis igne reuerti.
>
> (*You then bring forth, with the same bases, lesser living souls, and giving them light chariots fitting their heavenly nature, broadcast them in the heavens and the earth, and by returning fire, come back.*[279])

Accordingly, it would seem fair to suppose that Boethius, likely the first Roman to translate the lost works of Aristotle, used *causa* to translate Aristotle's *aition.* Since much of early medieval Aristotelian scholarship was based on the Boethian translations, then it

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[275] Cicero, M.Tullius [1]. 2003 *In Catilinam.* 1:5 <http://ancienthistory.about. com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm? site = http%3A%2F%2Fwww.thelatinlibrary.com%2Fcicero%2Fcat.shtml accessed August 14, 2006.
[276] Cicero, M.Tullius [2] (2003) *In Catilinam* 1:5 http://www.perseus.tufts.edu accessed August 14, 2006.
[277] Cicero [1] 1:7.
[278] Cicero [2] 1:7.
[279] Boethius. 1990 The *Consolation of Philosophy.* Cambridge, Mass: H.U.P pp.272 & 273.

is to be expected that medieval scholars would fall in with his use of *causa,* and with that translation.

No matter which Roman first used the word *causa* as a translation of Aristotle's *αιτία,* we again pose the question: why was the word *causa* selected? What in its historical use would have suggested it to a Roman translator? A brief etymological tracing of the Latin word *causa* might at once reveal something of what occasioned the earliest ancestral uses of the word, and elucidate the difficulties encountered when it appears in metaphysical discourse. Unfortunately, in the matter of its Latin etymology, we immediately come to a dead end; it is simply unknown.[280] Various people have given interpretative accounts that must be given no more weight than that of speculation. One suggested by Lewis and Short is that the roots of *causa* may lie with *cav,* translated as *a warning,* and *that which is defended or protected,* and its derivative *caveo,* translated as *to take care of legally*[281]. A second suggestion comes from Glare to the effect that the 'v' of *caveo* is replaced by 'u' and is given a more active use, thus to *be wary,* or *to be on one 's guard*[282]. A third suggestion, again from Glare, is that the origin of *causa* lies with *caudex,* translated as *a block of wood split or sawn into planks, leaves or tablets, and fastened together,* and *the block of wood to which one was bound for punishment*[283]. A fourth, from Klein, is that *causa* had its origins in *caudtra,* translated as *a striking, to*

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[280] Buck, Carl Darling. 1949. *A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo- European Languages.* Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press. p.1242 & Ernout, A., Meillet, A. (1959) *Dictionnaire Etymologique de la Langue Latine.* Paris: Libraire C. Klincksieck. p.108 & Klein, E. (1966) *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language: Dealing with the Origin of Words and their Sense Development Thus Illustrating the History of Civilization and Culture. Vol.I.* Amsterdam: Elsevier. p. 252.
[281] Lewis *causa sv.*
[282] Glare *causa sv.*
[283] Ibid.

strike, or *to beat* [284]. The final account to be given here is suggested by the softening in Latin of the plosive 'd' through voiced fricative to voiced sibilant 's'. *Cauda,* translated as *the tail of an animal,* also *to flatter and fawn, to have a tail stuck in mockery, to make a fool of,* is proffered as a possible etymological source.[285]

Now all the authors of these accounts admit that they are speculative and by no means to be satisfactorily established on the available evidence. Nor are they sufficient to provide much of an understanding of the Roman use of *causa* to translate the Greek *αιτία.* We simply don't know why the Romans chose the vocabulary that they did, and these accounts do not help us. *Causa* may have been selected merely because in Latin it is vague in all respects other than its connection to human conditions that occasion events. We can reasonably infer that the Romans *appropriated* the pre-theoretical vocabulary that they took to correspond to the pre-theoretical Greek vocabulary. Correspondence does not mean that the Latin *causa* meant the same as the Greek *aition.* Rather, it was likely thought to give the Roman reader some notion of Aristotle's account of the physical world. There could have been many ways in which the Roman language of *causa* corresponded with the Greek vocabulary of *aition,* if not in the same range of uses as, then at least in the same general areas of application. Assimilated into the new language of English as *cause*, it came with that loose affiliation, seeding the confusion that it generates in current lexical use. It does seem likely, however, that the Latin ancestor of the English *cause* that caused Hume so much difficulty was closer to the ancestor of *cause* as in 'a worthy cause' than to the later philosophical introductions of Boethius and the medieval scholars.

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[284] Klein *causa sv.*
[285] Lewis *cauda sv.*

All that is suggested by the work of the lexicographers is that the early *metaphysical* uses of *causa* can be regarded as a figurative appropriation that sets aside the earlier connection with human agency. As a migrant into metaphysical language from moral language, as a translation of Aristotle's correspondingly migrant *aition*, it seems to have been ill equipped to play any explanatory role with respect to the workings of the physical universe. It can have been at best schematic, standing in for more particularly informative transitive verbs and their nominal cognates. Hume may have intuitively understood this when he recognised that it had no observational application. On a physical account of the nature of the difficulty, the problem is not that the language of causation has unwarranted lexical content, but that in (and by) its philosophical uses, it has long since been relieved of the only lexical content it had ever had. Beyond conversational requirements, we, like Hume, do not know what we are talking about when we talk about *cause*, and it is probable that language provides no means for us to find out.

I have offered this conjectural case study of the vocable *cause* as an illustration of what can happen when the considerations adduced by Palmer are disregarded. From such historic evidence as I have been able to gather within my limited resources, it would appear that, in our philosophical use of the term *cause*, we may have lost, through the agencies of translation and lexicography, much of the Greek understanding of the vocable *αιτία* and much of the Roman understanding of both vocables, *aition* and *causa*. That the Romans chose *causa* as a translation of Aristotle's *aition* might offer some hint as to how they understood his understanding of it; there can be no guarantee, of course, that they were right.

POSTSCRIPT: LESSONS LEARNT

Preamble

I am not presenting this summation of lessons learnt as a list of tools for philosophical analysis, or as a way of providing some clues as to how ancient vocabulary was used, or to its meaning. I have been trying merely to understand why philosophical vocabulary, in general, and ancient vocabulary, in particular, is difficult. This summation of lessons learned is offered only as a brake on any optimism we might have that we can gain an understanding of ancient vocabulary or, for that matter, of present philosophical vocabulary, which we might regard as anywhere near ideal,

Background

Using a physical account of language, my investigation of philosophically difficult vocabulary proceeded from two background presumptions:

1. There is a physical dimension to understanding language use.
2. There is a diachronic dimension to understanding language use.

And was framed by two central concepts:

1. Linguistic innovation.
2. Intellectual predicament.

Summation of Lessons Learnt

The first lesson learnt is that, given my expertise, capacity and resources (including time), I can only grasp a glimmering of what conditions would constitute adequacy in any

recovery of archaic understanding. This is one of the difficulties facing anyone trying to articulate the problems involved. If we are to avoid the mere speculation that I have proffered in Chapter 4, then the standard of methodological care applied to the task has to be at least as high as that of Palmer.

Given a biological account of language and the facts of language change, two further lessons have become clear. The first is that the only way to understand earlier languages is aetiologically, that is, as outcomes of even earlier languages. A second lesson is that that an aetiological account can only yield an interpretation of the data, that is, it can only tell a story. One can be forgiven for regarding this thesis as a story of philosophical difficulty.

If Aristotle is right in claiming that to be perplexed is to be ignorant, then, setting aside our now familiar worries about the terms 'perplexed' and 'ignorant', and given the lessons learnt, it would seem that philosophers, at least with respect to the recovery of archaic understanding, are doomed to some degree of epistemic uncertainty. Even with the intellectual resources available to Palmer, it seems that we can never get beyond some measure of speculation, that we will forever be perplexed by the ancient texts. This is no cause for concern; but it does seem cause for caution, and an acceptance of intellectual uncertainty.

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