

## A LINGUISTIC CHAUVINIST OF SORTS

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### 1. *The Problem*

Homo erectus, habilis, sapiens, etc., and homo loquens (man the talker) somewhere in between, man was bound to begin "doing philosophy" somehow, sometime, somewhere. And, historically speaking at any rate, there did appear the first language in which the doing "philosophy" in the traditional sense was actually possible. Per definitionem (of the "traditional sense"), then, the first language was somehow "superior" to all the rest (up to that time) for that particular purpose. Is, or was ever, any other language generally "better" than others in doing philosophy? If so, why? If not, why not?

It is one thing that one "can do" philosophy in any language, manifestly in his/her own mother tongue in particular;<sup>1</sup> something else, however, is that one may perhaps "do it better" in a certain vernacular, as in the case of Elias Canetti, a Nobel-laureate (literature) in 1981. A Sepherdic Jew born in Bulgaria, he has been a wanderer in several nations, but he wrote as early as 1944: "If, despite everything [while shaken by Nazi bombings overhead in London], I should survive, then I owe it to Goethe" whose language he had been writing in. The latter has ever since remained the language he has decidedly preferred to all the rest "because I am Jewish" (whatever this proviso may mean).

He is certainly no exception on such matters as above where the "credo quia absurdum"<sup>2</sup> sort of irrationality, even, may reign supreme.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. (in childhood in particular) J.S. Bruner: "Learning the Mother Tongue," *Human Nature*, Sept. '78, pp. 42-9, with literature at the end.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Augustinus: *Confessiones*, VI, 5; or "credo quia impossibile est," etc. On my part (which is naturally the most concrete or real to me, in empathy with E. Canetti) I prefer Japanese to *Diálogos*, 41 (1983) pp. 157-165.



Most if not all of such linguistic problems are extralogical or extrarational in general, no doubt, bordering on something volitional or emotional, pure and simple. Or not so pure and simple, as in the case of Leo Tolstoy and his fellow literati who, while routinely carrying out their conversations in French (*sine qua non* for their educated or noble class in those days), considered their mother tongue nonetheless the greatest, at least its vocabulary the biggest,<sup>3</sup> in the entire world.

Such a linguistic chauvinism is quite understandable if seen, however individualized, in the light of the oft-quoted *Weltbild* by Wittgenstein: "The limits of my language are the limits of my world." But what kind of "limits"? And in which ways or means? Or in which manner?

The limits in a language, English for instance, in which the so-called "inkhornism" has thrived for some four centuries can hardly be the same or even similar in kind in another, German for example, in which a vernacularism of sorts has flourished in the paralleling period. And what if the language of Athens in antiquity can be characterized by just such a vernacularism? And, above all, how are such historical facts relevant to the task of doing philosophy?

## 2. *The Quid Facti*

Here are, first of all, some historical "facts" about which there can no longer be any disagreement of significance among all historians, of science in particular:

1. The agora (integrating "forum" into "emporium") of Athens in antiquity was the birthplace of "democratia" in the most proper sense of "The Glory That Was Greece." This is the subject on which tons of books and papers have been written for some two millennia—mostly in agreement, of course, rather than in disagreement.
2. The Classical Greece of (participatory) "democracy" was the time and place that gave birth to such exact or at least exacting sciences as logic and mathematics, now consciously for the

all other languages (half a dozen or more) for writing, and this, notwithstanding my ambivalent(?) feelings against the Japanese. This part is confessed here if only to prove that the case of Canetti is not exceptional.

<sup>3</sup> This sort of numbers-game makes one add: "the venerable Oxford English Dictionary certifies 414,825 words of the Queen's English" with about a million and a half quotations in the full 13-volume set (or 2 in its microprint edition). These are the numbers that the lexicographers in Korean or Japanese, even (let alone Russian, etc.), are nowadays trying to catch up with and surpass. Meanwhile, O.E.D. is to add 4 more vols. by 1985.

first time qua explicitly "demonstrative" disciplines. (Ditto for literature—another, if only perhaps much smaller, mountain.)

These two themes, if stated separately, are literally twice—(thousand-times)—told tales, hence absolutely in no need here of repetition whatsoever. And yet, if and when put together in an interwoven sort of way, then seen from a rather unorthodox standpoint, they deserve all the more thoroughly radical probing from scratch. For one thing, they have always failed (for whatever reason) to appear as coequal themes, however (somewhat) indistinguishably interwoven in appearance, in that politics and mathematics are now entwined inseparably, intrinsically. Namely, in detail (though restricted to the present century).

The "uniqueness" of the first theme (democracy) had already been so well-established by the times of Jacob Burckhardt, Werner Jaeger et alii, et aliae, that even the monumental colossus by each of these great masters had little to fortify, in essence, the main theme itself. The "happening-but-once" (J.B.'s favorite phrase) sort of uniqueness in the second theme (demonstration), however, was certainly not always considered in independent or coequal terms; if anything, the second was merely to fortify the first, as in some works against(?) Otto Neugebauer's epochal themes on the Babylonian mathematics.

At least one "fact" in history is absolutely certain in this context: Neither Neugebauer and his followers nor another colossus *Science and Civilization in China* (in seven tomes, so far, since 1954) by Joseph Needham and his associates, can demolish the second. The last group in particular has, if anything, further fortified it to the degree of absolute indisputability (unknown, strangely enough, to Needham himself<sup>4</sup>): The absence of "demonstration" in the proper sense in the entire historical span of mathematics in China and Japan (just as in Babylon, Egypt, etc.).<sup>5</sup>

## 3. *The Quid Juris*

If indisputable as above, why? Why, for all the brilliance in mathematical studies in China and Japan (to say nothing, in my individual

<sup>4</sup> Needham, now at age 81, wondered in 1937 "why modern science had originated only in Europe" and has ever since remained, it seems, uncertain about the reason—cf. his latest work: *Science in Traditional China*, Harvard '81, and this, when I did clarify it in mine in 1975: *Sociology of Mathematics and Mathematicians, a Prolegomenon*, Chapters 5-6, pp. 149-260.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 238-9n, 243-8n, 250-9n.



case,<sup>6</sup> of Babylon, India, etc.), was this conspicuous absence of "demonstration" qua method in these nations?

Because these nations had never developed anything resembling "democracy" as Athens did. Another indisputable fact. If so, how or why are these two inseparably interrelated?

Because only a very special society of "democratic" setting can find the problem of "common notions" worth its while, while the method of "demonstration" in turn is absolutely inconceivable unless it grows out of just such common notions. In a nutshell, then, here is a thought-experiment that may instantly put you into the shoes, or the sandals, of an Athenian free citizen in antiquity under democracy:

You are now debating with an opponent "in public"—recall here that "privacy is idiocy"<sup>7</sup> in classical Greek. You stand in front of your fellow-citizens at the agora. Bear in mind all the time that such a situation must necessarily call for a dialogue-type of "reasoning" instead of a "meditating" monologue-type in the East. There, alone, each thinker went wherever he could count on a place of isolation (desert, mountain, etc.). Here, however, you are now facing a crowd that watches and listens, driving you to the natural desire to win the debate.

But how? By "persuading" the crowds in general as well as your opponent in particular. And this is possible, of course, only if you would "talk the same language" that the crowd and your opponent could readily understand—the language "universally" founded on *koinai ennoiai* (common notions).<sup>8</sup> Hence follows the self-explanatory manner of Socrates reasoning, for ever harping on: "What do you mean... by justice, virtue, etc.?"

The "philos-sophia" at the initial state, in the tradition of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, was thus possible only because it was carried out "in public" and yet in intimacy—among a few thousands of free citizens around the agora, all with the same passion in reasoning in clear and simple vernacular. These were therefore the first in the history of mankind to be in the position at all, somehow or other, for demanding the "definition"<sup>9</sup> comprehensible even to the man in the street (or the

<sup>6</sup> Born at the farthest corner in the Far East, I could not help raising the same question Needham thought about in 1937 (cf. n. 4 above), prior in my case to any interest in Babylon, etc., as in M.A. thesis at Yale in 1950: "The Parting of East and West—A Metaphysical Genealogy of Mathematics." A "Sociological" one had to wait until 1975 (n. 4 above).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. (for the most readily available one) *Oxford Greek Lexikon*.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. (to name but one) T.L. Heath: *A Manual of Greek Mathematics*, Oxford 1930, pp. 195, 216.

<sup>9</sup> At the foundation of any "axiomatic" method, of course.

agora, that is), so as to begin "doing philosophy".

#### 4. *Doing Philosophy in Vernacular*

In the beginning, to repeat, doing philosophy in vernacular was the only available approach. It has its own drawback, to be sure, especially in double-entendre as in the case of "cosmos" for both "order" and "universe" (or "cosmos" today). Certain termini technici had to be developed, definitely by the time of Plato and Aristotle, but only very slowly and never, never to the extent of going beyond the comprehensibility of the man at the agora.

The last criterion was no longer a problem, however, by the age of scholasticism (nearly two millennia later). By 1440, then, when *De Docta Ignorantia* of Nicolaus Cusanus appeared, the prototype of such Cantorian paradoxes as "coincidentia oppositorum"<sup>10</sup> had already incorporated into "infinitum"—now a formidable terminus technicus.<sup>11</sup> Such, in fact, was the general atmosphere when the neologism of "inkhornist" (1592) and "inkhornism" (1597/98) could attain a solid respectability in England.<sup>12</sup>

The same must be said about the educated (so very few in those days!) in France and Germany except that, in the latter, Luther practiced what he had preached, translating the Bible in his vernacular to usher in the Age of Reformation. (His translation had begun in the epochal year, 1521, of excommunication; it took ten more years for completion.) Doing philosophy in German vernacular, however, had to wait still two more centuries. Leibniz, for one, kept his philosophical dignity intact in Latin and French. The young Kant (up to 47) too was writing in Latin for his official Inauguration-Dissertation.

Kant in his prime (at 57, say) was something else; he made no bones about his love for "doing philosophy" ("philosophieren" itself being his coinage) in vernacular. Even the first edition in 1781 of the first *Kritik* had vernacularized most if not all of key terms; "noumenon" for example becoming "das Ding an sich," etc. The latter was considered (not quite replaced) in terms of "das Ding überhaupt" in the second

<sup>10</sup> Cf. (in the light of mathematics today) J. Fang: *The Illusory Infinite—A Theology of Mathematics*, Paideia 1976, pp. 39ff.

<sup>11</sup> If only because it is now integrated into "continuum" as well—cf. *ibid.*, pp. 247-255 in particular.

<sup>12</sup> "Inkhorn term, a term of the literary language, a learned or bookish word (1543). Inkhornism. *Obsolete*. A learned or pedantic word or expression; an inkhorn term or phrase. Inkhornist, one who uses inkhorn terms." (*Oxford English Dictionary*).



edition (1787) which in turn, together with a large number of new termini technici in a similar mode ("das Bewusstsein überhaupt" for the old and stuffy "die transcendente Apperception" for instance), was to reorganize the *Kritik* in entirety.<sup>13</sup> And, beyond any doubt (if not to Schopenhauer and his followers<sup>14</sup>), there was a marked improvement in clarity through such vernacularizations.

This m.o. (modus operandi) was certainly more pronounced in the works of those who followed in his footsteps: Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger et alii—the last in particular with his notorious "Wortspielerei" (wordplay bordering on farce). The question, then, is this: Is vernacularism necessarily better than inhornism in doing philosophy?

Definitely not "necessarily" if at all. Take for example one of the worst kind in inhornism such as "sublation" in English for Hegel's "Aufheben" in German. The original verb is so very simple and commonplace that even a German child at the age of three or four may employ, as "Mutti, heb' das Kuchen auf für mich!". Its alleged English counterpart ("sublate"), however, is so utterly inhornistic, or so very formidable, that it can be found only in the biggest of all big dictionaries. (Not a single "collegiate" edition, not even that of Merriam-Webster's, allows its entry.)

Reasonably free from such obscurantism, or academic pomposity or intellectual(?) inanity, etc., then, doing philosophy in German does appear somewhat "better" than that in English. But this, only at first blush. For, as is clearly understandable through English translations, the sort of *Wortspielerei* Heidegger revels in can drive any ordinary German crazy. Written in vernacular, to be sure, it does not "necessarily" imply any simpler or clearer explications. Even the well-educated, as a matter of fact, are the first to confess—often showing the sign of amazement and sometimes of annoyance at—their inability to

<sup>13</sup> The first work, to my best knowledge, to make a systematic study of this topic (with an exhaustive list as well!) was H. Amrhein: "Kants Lehre von 'Bewusstsein Ueberhaupt,'" *Kant-Studien, Ergänzungsheft* 10, 1909. My own study on this (upon Amrhein's) began in 1949/50, in Prof. G. Schrader's Seminar on Kant, and is still going on.

<sup>14</sup> Laughable is Schopenhauer's view that Kant was "senile" soon after the first edition of the first *Kritik*, especially if seen in the light as above (n. 13). The second edition is so obviously, and so vastly, superior to the first. M. Müller, however, followed Schopenhauer's (decidedly wrong) advice, resulting in such impossible translations as "generally consciousness" for "consciousness in general" (incredible!).

understand what is so plainly(?) written out in their vernacular. Indubitable at this juncture is thus the sign of "limits" in vernacularism.

### 5. *Traduttore, Traditore!*

Needless to amplify here is the familiar difficulty between any two languages: Traduttore, traditore (the translator is a traitor)! This may not always hold, however, in doing philosophy. Take *Tao Teh Ching*, for example, and its numerous translations into the languages of the West. Several versions in English (at least three in paperbacks alone), German, French, etc. are no doubt widely diverse in interpretation and, as such, may not be as "faithful" as some commentaries in Chinese, Korean, and Japanese (easily hundreds or thousands in all). And yet, if seen through philosophical orientation, they cannot help shedding light—the more different, the better!—on Taoism if not on Lao Tze himself who was known, among his own contemporaries themselves, to be often totally incomprehensible.

Something similar, though on a far more modest scale, may be said about Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, say, in Japanese translation (in two versions at least) or in any other language but the German vernacular. Since each translator does dare to stick his neck out, sometimes too far out to be easily chopped off, in his own interpretation of the original, there is always something enlightening even to those whose mother-tongue is German—even, indeed, in some cases of mistranslation or misinterpretation.

Emphasis is here on "sometimes" of course, and something of a freakish nature at that, as in the case of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by Thomas S. Kuhn, to name but one. The key notions in his theory such as "normal science, paradigm, incommensurability, etc." seem to have grown out of the harmless remark by an old and sad man, Max Planck, who was desperately, so very bravely trying to be humorous at a meeting of his peer, young and old. His oft-quoted (and, by Kuhn, immortalized) view of a new theory and a new generation born with the theory was offered there "scherzhaft" (jokingly) of course; the tongue-in-cheek sort of German is quite manifest in the original. For one thing, if seen in the light of historical facts, he must have been the first to admit that his theory of quanta had been recognized soon enough, and definitely in the pattern of the gradual "evolution"<sup>15</sup> instead of

<sup>15</sup> Cf. J. Fang: "A Devastating Double-Entendre in 'Evolution,'" *Contemporary Philosophy*, v. 7, n. 5 (1978), pp. 20-1.



the Kuhnian "revolution" in particular.

A list of such freakish cases of "traduttore, traditore" as above<sup>16</sup> can instantly grow into an impossible length, hence cannot interest us here. The question in need of an immediate answer, instead, is rather as to how one can "do philosophy better" in whichever language he or she prefers to others, of inhornism or vernacularism.

A sample question: Is Freud for example necessarily "better" understood in German, of vernacularism (in which Freud himself indulged), than in English of inhornism? Are English-speaking Freudians doing "better" than their German-speaking colleagues while employing "mental apparatus," "scophilia," "parapraxis," "cathesis," etc., instead of "soul (*Seele*)," "(sexual) pleasure in looking (*Schaulust*)," "faulty achievement or Freudian slip (*Fehlleistung*)," "fixation or occupation (*Besetzung*)," etc., respectively?<sup>17</sup> The latter's famous trio of "ego, id, and superego" was originally as simple and plain in vernacular as "ich, es, und über-ich." Was Freud wrong, in the first place, to follow the German tradition, eloquently appealing to "our common humanity"? Are his American followers, going against such a time-honored tradition, more "scientific" in their translation of jawbreaking jargon? Was Freud thus "betrayed"<sup>18</sup> by his English-speaking translators?

Or more generally: How far must we let ourselves go, through the inhornism as above, toward the respectability(?) of being "scientific" or "abstract, depersonalized, highly theoretical, erudite, mechanized," etc.? And in practice: "long on theory, short on sympathy and emotional closeness" to humanity?

There is something sane and sound about the vernacularism in German, even in medical sciences (as in the particular case of Freud<sup>19</sup>) for instance. Only the very green "Doktor med." or the impossibly pompous "Arzt" would tell his/her patient about the latter's "Pneumonie, Appendicitis," etc. instead of the common and customary diagnoses of "Lungenentzündung (inflammation of lung), Blindarmentzündung (do. of blind gut)," etc., respectively. And yet, as anybody

<sup>16</sup> For instance (to add one more) "The Most Unnatural 'Natural Deduction,'" in which I pointed out the "asinine" manner the term "natural" had committed the sin of equivocation.

<sup>17</sup> Some examples employed by Bruno Bettelheim in his recent article in *New Yorker* (3.82), reported in detail in *Time* (3.22.82), p. 61.

<sup>18</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>19</sup> Bettelheim, or the *Time*-article on him, somehow failed to mention the case in the light (as here) of the general practice in the old tradition since Luther.

familiar with the Heideggerian mode of obfuscation in *Wortspielerei* would eagerly attest, such a practice could easily go too far, too. The m.o. of Luther, Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche et alii in vernacular is one thing; that of Hegel, Heidegger et alii in the same is something else.

Here is an ample room, then, for the constant refrain of an age-old (however hackneyed) principle of "meden agan" (let nothing be carried to excess) since Aristotle. Philosophers should better be the first to practice what they have been preaching for over two millennia. If the Golden Mean was good enough for Socrates and others at the agora, it must still be sane and sound enough for their counterparts today.

Consider the case, in this mode of reviving the time-honored spirit in practice, of Popper contra Heidegger for instance. To the former, the latter is more or less the man [who] may so utterly bore himself that the thing-in-itself is Nothing—that is Nothingness, Emptiness-in-itself; hence, "what he discovers in himself...: the utter boredom of the bore-in-himself bored by himself."<sup>20</sup> Popper is obviously unaware here of a possibility or confirmability or rather falsifiability (rectifiability?) that he may exemplify a bore-bored-by-himself in himself if he cannot discern there a healthy concern over the ultimate unknown, death, or may "utterly" fail to enjoy even the euphony in vernacular.

It is one thing, again, to condemn Heidegger for his sin of reckless indulgence in vernacularism (or, though unmentioned by Popper, for his "youthful" antics in politics); something else, however, is the manner Popper threw the baby away with the bathwater—so utterly contrary to the philosophical tradition of *meden agan* all the way. Something to think about, at least, I submit; there may not be any "better" language in doing philosophy even though there can be some "bad" or "poor" philosophy.

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. "On the Status of Science and of Metaphysics," 1958 (in *Conjectures and Refutations*, 1963) with a trace of his enormous self-righteousness in *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 1943/51/57.