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The Philosopher's Stone

Armstrong College of Liberal Arts

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3-22-1999

### Language Trap

Philosophical Discussion Group, Armstrong State University

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Philosophical Discussion Group, Armstrong State University, "Language Trap" (1999). *The Philosopher's Stone*. 18.

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# The Philosopher's Stone

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Debate Group



## Language Trap

Primate specialists up the road in Atlanta have done some amazing work with various simians and speech. One of the scientists even went so far as to raise a rare breed of monkey alongside her child. She has concluded that the monkey's only obstacle to conversation is his lack of vocal cords.

Some research on dolphins indicates that the whistle-like calls are far more complex than has previously been suspected. In an eloquent essay, Loren Easley imagines dolphins with speech as complex as human speech. Fully conscious of themselves, the dolphins cannot invent writing (they have only

flippers, not hands), but they float in a sort of prehistoric oral culture, incapable of modifying their environment or destroying it.

More than any other characteristic, the ability to speak and write separates humans from all the other animals of the world.

There's a very funny line attributed to GK.

Chesterton: When asked about animal language, he said that perhaps among, say, dogs, one kind of bark means danger and another signals the presence of food, but "no dog ever walked up to another and said 'My parents were poor but honest.'"

But proud of speech though we may be, we know very little about it. We don't understand how children acquire it with so little effort. We don't know why words can move grown ups to tears or blows.

There is no cliché as false as the rhyme about sticks and stones.

For philosophers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, language

is a central concern. In this respect, modern philosophy has its one great root in the work of Nietzsche, who argued famously that words are "a mobile army of metaphors." That is, language is fully arbitrary. Words are not only not the things they stand for, but the word/thing relationship is a complete artifice.

We might ask some of the following questions about language and philosophy.

When we discuss language, we use language. How does this limit our understanding? What is the connection between language and ontology? Is the world a phenomena of speech? What should one make of those postmodernists who claim that language is intrinsically unstable, constantly shifting in meaning?

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Come to Gamble Hall, Room 213 (Honors Room), on Tuesday, March 30<sup>th</sup>, at 8:00 p.m. and share your ideas.

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## Letters

### Strength and Weakness

–t.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall / Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.  
All the king's horses and all the king's men / Couldn't put Humpty together again.

I was sitting on my porch reading, and i had a thought, like the sudden sound of a saxophone echoing through a deserted subway station (though probably not quite so entertaining). I think that i missed an approach when i was thinking about this before (what? three years ago, at a Philosophy club party?). I was focusing on Humpty. We were trying to come up with a coherent symbolic analyses to understand the significance and timelessness of this little rhyme (Dr. Baker, i think i recall, was particularly and interestingly loquacious on the subject).

What i thought about at sunrise today was that sometimes there are fragile things that break, and no matter what we try or do, nor what resources are available to us, we can't put them back together again. Humpty embodies this weakness for us and reminds us that we have limitations; that there are things that we can't fix with our horses and forces, our terminology and tools, our brains and cunning. Yet having these things, we allow ourselves the illusion that we have some ultimate regal power to control our lives and fix the broken parts. Disillusionment is the well we fall into as we walk along gazing at the stars. Ask Thales.

Maybe Dumpty was the king's heart or pride, and maybe the king is each of us after all. On a more shallow note, i broke one of mother's Blue Willow antiques once when i was little (she still mentions it, by the way); i wanted to put it back together for her, but could not. No adhesive stuff could make it the same again. Even little superficial / material things like that remind us that what has been done can never be undone. The effects of our actions leave permanent marks on the face of reality and our attempts to fix things leave further marks rather than eradicating the old one.

Anyway, i thought of this while reading Sartre and thinking about Kant. Go figure. The empowerment of the individual and responsibility of the Self for the Self are important paths to traverse, but can we overlook the humanity of our Selves in so doing? Isn't part of that humanity a weakness? How can we acknowledge limitations without creating excuses? How can we take responsibility for the Self without denying some part of the Self? Must always be something left out? When a philosopher focuses on our weakness, I get angry. No, we can be strong, rational, and intelligent enough to be autonomous beings and still acknowledge our communal role without the intervention of external forces. When a philosopher focuses on strength, I find my little thoughts wanting to affirm neutral incapacities in Nietzschean prayer, if you will let me get away with that oxymoron, "Thank you for things just the way they are").

I guess what i am seeking is some kind of reconciliation, which can, I believe, be neatly categorized as an infeasible endeavor. Wouldn't one need to be pretty savvy in complex system theory to even begin? If there is some truth in each position, how can we make the puzzle fit together? Since I'm fence-sitting and can't really articulate why, perhaps it would be better to listen to Wittgenstein: "Whereof, one cannot speak, one must be silent." (i must wonder, though, what of which we could speak were we to strictly adhere to that. But that's a language issue for a later letter.) I would like to ad, semi-irrelevantly, that every choice comes with two groups of losses: those things which one could have chosen instead, and those things which had been prior to the making of the choice. My favorite Law; "Everything has a price." Frost reminds us "how way leads on to way," which not only calls to mind the passage of time and sequence of events which pull us forward, but also of the whole Heraclitian inability to step in the same river twice" thing.

Another ditty about the Humpty rhyme that occurred to me is the gentle acceptance of the familiar.: it is simply stated: they couldn't do it. End of poem. Life goes on. Next? There is a kind of Stoic strength in that, too, isn't there?

## Quotations

Everything can change, but not the language that we carry inside us, like a world more exclusive and final than one's mother's womb.

**Italo Calvino** (1923–85), Italian novelist, critic. *Grand Bazaar* (Milan, Sept.-Oct. 1980; repr. in *The Literature Machine*, 1987).

Language is a process of free creation; its laws and principles are fixed, but the manner in which the principles of generation are used is free and infinitely varied. Even the interpretation and use of words involves a process of free creation.

**Noam Chomsky** (b. 1928), U.S. linguist, political analyst. "Language and Freedom," lecture, Jan. 1970, delivered at Loyola University, Chicago (published in *For Reasons of State*, 1973).

Man acts as though *he* were the shaper and master of language, while in fact *language* remains the master of man.

**Martin Heidegger** (1889–1976), German philosopher. "Building Dwelling Thinking," lecture, 5 Aug. 1951 (published in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 1971).

## Notes from the Last Meeting

The meeting began with the question, "Is higher education sometimes pursued needlessly by students who do not really need a college degree?" Many felt that society and the business world have made a college degree a necessity, but needlessly so. Also, some felt that the degree itself has been devalued through grade inflation in order to push weaker students through the system.

Furthermore, some students felt that very few of their classmates come to college to seek enlightenment in the sense of a "liberal education." Accordingly, many wondered if how to think was being taught in college at all? Or even if should be? And if how to think is not being taught, why is that the case? Does society have room for so many thinkers, or does it simply need more rule followers?

Some pointed to the economic considerations, both for society as a whole and for the administrations of smaller, less prestigious colleges and universities? It is obviously in the best interest economically for most colleges to enroll and ultimately pass as many students as possible.

While overall the prospects of widespread change are somewhat dim, one solution that was offered was for students to resist by identifying and communicating the problem..

## Meeting Times for Spring Semester

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All meetings are at 8 p.m. in Room 213 (Honors Room) in Gamble Hall.

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Tuesday, March 30  
Tuesday, April 20

## Contributions

The PDG is always open to new ideas. If you've got any submissions or suggestions, please e-mail us at one of the addresses below or drop a note in the thought box in the Writing Center in Gamble 109.

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