

# *Assorted Articles*

## **Language and reality**

As human beings, we tend to think in terms of our language. Language deals with concepts and with rules. We also tend to think that this system of rules and concepts has a close relationship to how the world works. It is important to realise to what extent this is true, and when it falls down.

Language requires that words (and thus concepts) are defined in terms of other words. This means that very little, if anything, has intrinsic meaning; instead things have meaning in their relationships to other things. Nevertheless, a definition amounts to a set of rules that determine what a concept represents; rules that can be applied again and again, in any number of different circumstances. A definition is an absolute statement, albeit interlinked with other definitions.

We often find it very difficult to produce satisfactory definitions for some words and concepts. Notable examples are 'art', 'life', 'love', 'intelligence', 'identity', and even 'nationality'. The definition of each these concepts becomes an enduring philosophical problem. When we struggle with these definitions, we believe that we are struggling with the understanding and interpretation of reality, whereas we are actually struggling with language and nothing more. This is what I mean by saying that we assume the system of rules that language represents has a close relationship to how the world works. We often think we are trying to understand reality when we are actually just trying to understand language; our own system of representation and analysis of reality.

We try to produce definitions that divide the world in two. A definition will tell us when an object possesses a property and when it does not; when a certain situation exists and when it does not. Often, the world does *not* work in this way. Frequently whether an object possesses a property is not clear, is not definable. Take the case of the concept 'life', for example; our linguistic approach assumes that an object either possesses life or it does not. It is assumed that a definition exists that will determine in all circumstances and without contradiction, whether something is alive. I maintain that the concept 'life' is not an intrinsic quality of reality, but rather it is simply our definition; our linguistic construct of a set of rules that represents how we use the word 'life'. In understanding the difference between language and reality, we should know when to strive for accuracy, reliability and consistency in our linguistic definitions, and when to simply recognise and deal with the uncertainty.

In these situations, we should be wary of trying to produce definitions when they are difficult to produce. We should ask ourselves, "What is the benefit of producing a concrete definition of this concept?" How would we benefit from a linguistic yardstick that tells us, for example, when one thing is art and another is not? We should not assume that such a

definition exists. In the case of art, for example, I feel that no definition could be produced that could not be disproved by a counterexample.

We should be ready to recognise when definitions (or rather, the search for definitions) is futile or unhelpful. Equally, we should be ready to accept flexible definitions in certain circumstances.

Even simple concepts we think are clear, precise and immutable may be hard to define without fear of contradiction. For example, consider the following diagrams:



If I were to ask, “Is figure a) a circle?” this would seem a fairly straightforward question, since the concept ‘circle’ is clearly defined. The concept belongs to the world of mathematics; a symbolic language of our own construction, in which all is clear and all is defined (although, I’m sure, some mathematicians would take issue with this statement). However, when dealing with real-world situations, even this simple problem is open to interpretation. Figure a) may be seen to be a circle in so much as figure b) is a square, yet the figure I see is made up of pixels (or blobs of ink if printed out). As such, it is an approximation of a circle, rather than a perfect circle by the mathematical definition. In the latter sense, a circle is a theoretic construct, and any depiction of it will always be an approximation. It is also important to note that although neither a) nor b) are in the strictest sense ‘circles’, b) is less of a circle than a). This relates, of course, to mathematical definition and to its graphical interpretation in the real world; the same is true of more generalised linguistic definition.

To realise when we can use our paradigm of strict linguistic definition and when this is inappropriate for our interpretation of reality, is an important skill that I do not feel we as a race have mastered.

## **How do we address alcohol abuse?**

Alcohol abuse takes up a significant proportion of the resources of the police and the medical profession. Reducing alcohol abuse would free up a great deal of these resources for use on more worthy causes. However, when steps are taken to reduce alcohol abuse, they are often unpopular, as they can be seen to reduce personal freedom and interfere with people’s ‘right’ to drink excessively if they so choose.

I suggest the introduction of personal alcohol licenses, implemented in a similar manner to driving licenses. A person should have to pass a test to get an alcohol license, and it would be illegal to sell alcohol to someone who does not have one. Any drinking-related offences, such as being drunk and disorderly, drink-driving, drinking without a license, would lead to points on the license, or a ban, or making it harder to get a license (the latter point meaning

that underage drinkers would find it hard to get a license later on). This would not change anybody's rights, and it would not mean people could not drink. It would simply mean that there is a mechanism of penalising the abuse of alcohol, and reducing the likelihood of repeated abuse. We know it could be administered because driving licenses work this way.

Alcohol is very dangerous in the wrong hands. It leads to a large proportion of physical attacks and property damage, injuries requiring medical attention, unwanted pregnancies, obesity and heart problems. People who cannot use alcohol sensibly should not be allowed to have it. This is just common sense. Just like cars can be dangerous, and we do not allow irresponsible or incapable people to use them, so it should be with alcohol. Currently, it is up to the individual whether or not to drink too much and become dangerous, unpredictable and a risk to others. This situation should not be acceptable. Clearly, many people are not capable of making that decision. It seems odd that the norm is for many people consistently to abuse alcohol on a regular basis, and that this is accepted. The only people who should be worried about this suggestion are those who abuse alcohol, and so they should be worried.

One might object to this idea on the grounds that it would lead to 'underground' drinking (selling alcohol to those without licenses). I do not suggest that the introduction of alcohol licenses would eradicate the problem of alcohol abuse in a single stroke; only that it would reduce it significantly, and give us the tools to limit it. 'Underground drinking' might still occur, but it would be illegal and we would be able to prosecute such behaviour.

The implementation of such a scheme would require considerable thought. It would not be cheap, and it would face resistance; people do not like having to take tests, and they do not like having restrictions imposed on them. Also, there would have to be a mechanism of dealing with alcoholics in this scheme, as a simple ban on drinking would be dangerous for this group of people (possibly a programme of rehabilitation including a staged withdrawal). I believe that this would still be worth doing, as it is a sensible mechanism for fighting a serious problem that affects most people at some point, and permeates society. The benefits would certainly be worth the effort. The general level of health the populace would improve; the NHS would be much better funded for its needs; streets would be safer, and the police would be able to fight crime without having to deal with the ever-present undercurrent of drunken behaviour and fighting.

## **The internet and responsibility**

*Comments on the BBC Panorama programme "Children's Fight Club", July 2007, which discussed the posting of video clips of assaults on children on websites such as YouTube.*

I was concerned by what I saw in the Panorama documentary, as it seemed to me to indicate the increasing avoidance of responsibility on the web.

Those in charge of the websites that were being used to post offensive material seemed to have a set of prepared "don't blame me" answers to questions about these posts. These tended to relate to the freedom of the internet, and how the posts were there at the

demand of the wider web-using public. I was certainly not convinced that those who allow these posts to remain available are valiant crusaders for freedom-of-speech and allowing the web to evolve as we the public see fit.

If you (as a website administrator, for example) are in a position to reduce the amount of humiliating, pernicious or inflammatory material on your site, surely you should do so. Refusal to do this smacks of exploitation of other people's misfortune or misery for your own benefit (to promote your site).

The major defence YouTube had was that the users policed the site, not the administrators. Firstly, this is not the case, as users do not have any powers to determine which posts remain, only to bring them to the attention of the site's own decision-making process on what is acceptable. Secondly, from what the documentary was saying, the 'reporting' process simply didn't work (in as much as the posts that YouTube themselves admitted should be removed were not, following the reporting process). Thirdly, the site's decisions on whether to remove posts seemed highly questionable – a clip of vandalism of a police car, for example was 'acceptable'. I think that inclusion of such a clip is fairly likely to promote other similar acts of vandalism.

The key point for me is that where a clip shows someone who has not given their permission, the case for removing it seems fairly cut-and-dried. A clip of two consenting idiots in a fight is very different from a clip of a non-consenting victim being assaulted, and there is no freedom-of-speech, will-of-the-public, this-is-just-social-comment argument that will justify the latter.

I am constantly infuriated by the fact that businesses will almost never do anything simply because it is the right thing to do – there must always be a financial incentive. With this in mind, perhaps a number of cases for compensation should be brought against these websites, or possibly just pressure from other large companies advertising on them. Although I am usually against the compensation culture, maybe this sort of action would force websites to start acting responsibly.

*Further comment on a note on Sheffield Forum indicating that we should "blame ourselves and not the mirror" since this was a reflection of our society, and stating that interference in YouTube postings is censorship.*

Part of this "blaming ourselves" is realising what sustains and promotes this kind of activity, and trying to stop it. If we determine that allowing children to show off their anti-social tendencies to gain the admiration of their peers does this, then we should take action to reduce this. I reiterate that saying "it's all societies fault" is avoidance of responsibility. If you are in a position to do something about an undesirable situation, do so. YouTube is not exempt from this, any more than it is not part of the 'society' whose fault this all apparently is.

It is true that censorship should be kept to a minimum, but the removal of these clips hardly amounts to censorship, since they are not expressions of opinion. Neither are they a documentary reflection of society intended as shocking revelation, since, as others are keen

to point out, children fighting is “nothing new”. The motivation for the posts is crucial here – these are not posted as documentary or social comment, they are posted by thugs showing off.

## **Standardised packaging**

I suggest the use of standardised and reusable packaging for many products. For products coming in 1L bottles, for examples, the same 1L bottle would be used, rather than each company producing its own. Each company is allowed to put stickers on the bottle, as long as they are of a specific removable type. In this way, bottles could be washed and reused by all the companies – reducing both waste and production costs, as well as allowing the company to demonstrate its commitment to ecological sustainability. This would be much more efficient than recycling bottles, and would probably be cheaper for companies buying in the bottles. The scheme could either be voluntary or legislated – a company would have to have a good reason to use its own 1L bottle design.

There would need to be collection of the bottles, as with other recycling, and companies to wash and redistribute the bottles, but as a standard product, these need not be shipped back to the factory of the company using the bottles, as there should be local suppliers everywhere. This would reduce the amount of transport (fuel, congestion, cost) used in the production and distribution of a product.

This could apply to a lot of packaging. I do not see anyone suggesting better alternatives to constantly producing and disposing of packaging as waste, which is a problem that must be addressed because of a) our requirement for packaged products, and b) the significant environmental impact of production and disposal of single-use packaging. My alternative should be cheaper and more ecologically sound than recycling the numerous different packaging designs. It would also facilitate refilling facilities, where consumers can take their own washed packaging to refill from a dispenser, rather than buying new ones.

What are the possible objections to the scheme?

- 1) Companies like their own recognisable packaging. Companies would still be allowed to put their own stickers on the packaging, meaning that the brand is still recognisable. The eco-gimmick should be a good selling point, at least at first. If companies are still resistant, they should be made to understand that certain sacrifices must be made to produce an environmentally sustainable long-term solution to the disposable packaging problem. They should be made to realise that their marketing schemes are less important. It may be necessary to legislate and impose usage of the reusable packaging.
- 2) How do you convince existing companies change their packaging structure and process, which may well cost them more in the short term? Legislate, or approach a small group of large companies to act as trail-blazers.
- 3) Collection, washing and redistribution may be more costly than producing more, or even recycling. Although it would require a significant start-up cost, I think it would be cheaper in the long-term, although this would require investigation. The fact that processing could be done locally, rather than having to redistribute cleaned bottles a

long distance should involve a significant saving. Furthermore, current recycling infrastructure (and companies) could be used and expanded. Finally, the current situation requires a change, so a solution must be found even if it costs more.

## **Biological diversity vs. human abundance**

If we really want to preserve the variety of life of the planet, then we must make a decision that a certain number of people is enough. The increasing human population demands more resources from the planet. We have to make a decision about whether we want more people or biological diversity. At some point, is diversity of animal life better than abundance of human life? We cannot have both; Earth can only support so much life.

It is assumed that big bad technological advance destroys the environment for all the cuddly little animals. Technology is the key to *optimising* our use of resources, *if we use it properly*. We are not intrinsically destructive creatures; we are simply very good at adapting ourselves and our environment. No other creature would think twice about dwindling populations of other species. We have a choice to do so or not. We must not assume that because we are human, we approve of more human life. Simply having more of us is not intrinsically good. We must have a sensible number of us living happy lives. We cannot simply be more considerate and live in harmony with our animal chums; we must decide when we value their presence more than our own reproductive urge.

## **On alien life**

Although in modern times the idea that Earth has been visited by alien life has taken on less of a divine connotation and has become interwoven with the idea government or military deception (born of the Cold-War) the idea has been present throughout human history, and one of the almost universal features of mythology is that of celestial visitors bringing civilisation to a primitive human race, or indeed the human race itself.

This gives us little evidence for the existence of alien life or its involvement in human history, yet it remains an interesting and powerful theme in our mental makeup. It stems, I believe, from two features of the human psyche. Firstly, our desire not to be alone and to be part of something larger than ourselves. This itself is a combination of man's essentially social nature and the fact that much of a human's life is internal, more than any other creature, and this leaves us with an underlying solitude and loneliness to our outlook. Secondly, a veneration of (and eventually deification of) our ancient ancestors, seen especially in ancient times as the source of all the 'higher concepts' of man that amount to civilisation and our elevation above the animals.

Bearing this in mind, I do not think that the idea of alien visitation should be instinctively ridiculed as the adolescent fantasy of bumpkins, but rather understood for what it is – an indication of a common human desire and psychological trend.

My own personal inclination about the question of alien life is that it is likely that life exists on other planets, since it would be a fantastic coincidence if the probability of life occurring within the universe led to exactly one planet with life but no more. The same argument should also apply to whether *intelligent* life exists on other planets, but I do not know if intelligence is such an efficient feature of life that evolution would produce it frequently. The idea that alien life has visited Earth within the span of human history seems unlikely. Given the size of the universe and the time required for intelligent life to evolve, intelligent life would have to be extremely frequently occurring for it to coincide spatially (close enough to visit) and temporally (evolving at the same time) with that on Earth. The idea that alien visitations have been hidden from the general populace by a misguided government seems even less likely. If an alien civilisation were sufficiently advanced to travel to Earth, it is unlikely that they would need 'local help' to cover up their existence if that was their desire. Furthermore, given our frantic desire to meet another race, I think that if an alien civilisation were to find us, they would be equally keen to meet us, and keeping themselves hidden would not be in their interests.