PART I

Contingency
I

The contingency of language

About two hundred years ago, the idea that truth was made rather than found began to take hold of the imagination of Europe. The French Revolution had shown that the whole vocabulary of social relations, and the whole spectrum of social institutions, could be replaced almost overnight. This precedent made utopian politics the rule rather than the exception among intellectuals. Utopian politics sets aside questions about both the will of God and the nature of man and dreams of creating a hitherto unknown form of society.

At about the same time, the Romantic poets were showing what happens when art is thought of no longer as imitation but, rather, as the artist’s self-creation. The poets claimed for art the place in culture traditionally held by religion and philosophy, the place which the Enlightenment had claimed for science. The precedent the Romantics set lent initial plausibility to their claim. The actual role of novels, poems, plays, paintings, statues, and buildings in the social movements of the last century and a half has given it still greater plausibility.

By now these two tendencies have joined forces and have achieved cultural hegemony. For most contemporary intellectuals, questions of ends as opposed to means — questions about how to give a sense to one’s own life or that of one’s community — are questions for art or politics, or both, rather than for religion, philosophy, or science. This development has led to a split within philosophy. Some philosophers have remained faithful to the Enlightenment and have continued to identify themselves with the cause of science. They see the old struggle between science and religion, reason and unreason, as still going on, having now taken the form of a struggle between reason and all those forces within culture which think of truth as made rather than found. These philosophers take science as the paradigmatic human activity, and they insist that natural science discovers truth rather than makes it. They regard “making truth” as a merely metaphorical, and thoroughly misleading, phrase. They think of politics and art as spheres in which the notion of “truth” is out of place. Other philosophers, realizing that the world as it is described by the physical sciences teaches no moral lesson, offers no spiritual comfort, have concluded that science is no more than the handmaiden of tech-
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ology. These philosophers have ranged themselves alongside the political utopian and the innovative artist.

Whereas the first kind of philosopher contrasts “hard scientific fact” with the “subjective” or with “metaphor,” the second kind sees science as one more human activity, rather as the place at which human beings encounter a “hard,” nonhuman reality. On this view, great scientists invent descriptions of the world which are useful for purposes of predicting and controlling what happens, just as poets and political thinkers invent other descriptions of it for other purposes. But there is no sense in which any of these descriptions is an accurate representation of the way the world is in itself. These philosophers regard the very idea of such a representation as pointless.

Had the first sort of philosopher, the sort whose hero is the natural scientist, always been the only sort, we should probably never have had an autonomous discipline called “philosophy” — a discipline as distinct from the sciences as it is from theology or from the arts. As such a discipline, philosophy is no more than two hundred years old. It owes its existence to attempts by the German idealists to put the sciences in their place and to give a clear sense to the vague idea that human beings make truth rather than find it. Kant wanted to consign science to the realm of second-rate truth — truth about a phenomenal world. Hegel wanted to think of natural science as a description of spirit not yet fully conscious of its own spiritual nature, and thereby to elevate the sort of truth offered by the poet and the political revolutionary to first-rate status.

German idealism, however, was a short-lived and unsatisfactory compromise. For Kant and Hegel went only halfway in their repudiation of the idea that truth is “out there.” They were willing to view the world of empirical science as a made world — to see matter as constructed by mind, or as consisting in mind insufficiently conscious of its own mental character. But they persisted in seeing mind, spirit, the depths of the human self, as having an intrinsic nature — one which could be known by a kind of nonempirical super science called philosophy. This meant that only half of truth — the bottom, scientific half — was made. Higher truth, the truth about mind, the province of philosophy, was still a matter of discovery rather than creation.

What was needed, and what the idealists were unable to envisage, was a repudiation of the very idea of anything — mind or matter, self or world — having an intrinsic nature to be expressed or represented. For the idealists confused the idea that nothing has such a nature with the idea that space and time are unreal, that human beings cause the spatiotemporal world to exist.

We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out
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there and the claim that truth is out there. To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations.

Truth cannot be out there — cannot exist independently of the human mind — because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own — unaided by the describing activities of human beings — cannot.

The suggestion that truth, as well as the world, is out there is a legacy of an age in which the world was seen as the creation of a being who had a language of his own. If we cease to attempt to make sense of the idea of such a nonhuman language, we shall not be tempted to confuse the platitude that the world may cause us to be justified in believing a sentence true with the claim that the world splits itself up, on its own initiative, into sentence-shaped chunks called “facts.” But if one clings to the notion of self-subsistent facts, it is easy to start capitalizing the word “truth” and treating it as something identical either with God or with the world as God’s project. Then one will say, for example, that Truth is great, and will prevail.

This conflation is facilitated by confining attention to single sentences as opposed to vocabularies. For we often let the world decide the competition between alternative sentences (e.g., between “Red wins” and “Black wins” or between “The butler did it” and “The doctor did it”). In such cases, it is easy to run together the fact that the world contains the causes of our being justified in holding a belief with the claim that some nonlinguistic state of the world is itself an example of truth, or that some such state “makes a belief true” by “corresponding” to it. But it is not so easy when we turn from individual sentences to vocabularies as wholes. When we consider examples of alternative language games — the vocabulary of ancient Athenian politics versus Jefferson’s, the moral vocabulary of Saint Paul versus Freud’s, the jargon of Newton versus that of Aristotle, the idiom of Blake versus that of Dryden — it is difficult to think of the world as making one of these better than another, of the world as deciding between them. When the notion of “description of the world” is moved from the level of criterion-governed sentences within language games to language games as wholes, games which we do not choose between by reference to criteria, the idea that the world decides which descriptions are true can no longer be given a clear sense. It becomes
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hard to think that that vocabulary is somehow already out there in the world, waiting for us to discover it. Attention (of the sort fostered by intellectual historians like Thomas Kuhn and Quentin Skinner) to the vocabularies in which sentences are formulated, rather than to individual sentences, makes us realize, for example, that the fact that Newton's vocabulary lets us predict the world more easily than Aristotle’s does not mean that the world speaks Newtonian.

The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that. The realization that the world does not tell us what language games to play should not, however, lead us to say that a decision about which to play is arbitrary, nor to say that it is the expression of something deep within us. The moral is not that objective criteria for choice of vocabulary are to be replaced with subjective criteria, reason with will or feeling. It is rather that the notions of criteria and choice (including that of “arbitrary” choice) are no longer in point when it comes to changes from one language game to another. Europe did not decide to accept the idiom of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics. That sort of shift was no more an act of will than it was a result of argument. Rather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others.

As Kuhn argues in *The Copernican Revolution*, we did not decide on the basis of some telescopic observations, or on the basis of anything else, that the earth was not the center of the universe, that macroscopic behavior could be explained on the basis of microstructural motion, and that prediction and control should be the principal aim of scientific theorizing. Rather, after a hundred years of inconclusive muddle, the Europeans found themselves speaking in a way which took these interlocked theses for granted. Cultural change of this magnitude does not result from applying criteria (or from “arbitrary decision”) any more than individuals become theists or atheists, or shift from one spouse or circle of friends to another, as a result either of applying criteria or of *actes gratuits*. We should not look within ourselves for criteria of decision in such matters any more than we should look to the world.

The temptation to look for criteria is a species of the more general temptation to think of the world, or the human self, as possessing an intrinsic nature, an essence. That is, it is the result of the temptation to privilege some one among the many languages in which we habitually describe the world or ourselves. As long as we think that there is some relation called “fitting the world” or “expressing the real nature of the self” which can be possessed or lacked by vocabularies-as-wholes, we
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shall continue the traditional philosophical search for a criterion to tell us which vocabularies have this desirable feature. But if we could ever become reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it, and that the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary, then we should at last have assimilated what was true in the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found. What is true about this claim is just that languages are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences.¹

I can sum up by redescribing what, in my view, the revolutionaries and poets of two centuries ago were getting at. What was glimpsed at the end of the eighteenth century was that anything could be made to look good or bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless, by being re-described. What Hegel describes as the process of spirit gradually becoming self-conscious of its intrinsic nature is better described as the process of European linguistic practices changing at a faster and faster rate. The phenomenon Hegel describes is that of more people offering more radical redescriptions of more things than ever before, of young people going through half a dozen spiritual gestalt-switches before reaching adulthood. What the Romantics expressed as the claim that imagination, rather than reason, is the central human faculty was the realization that a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change. What political utopians since the French Revolution have sensed is not that an enduring, substratal human nature has been suppressed or repressed by “unnatural” or “irrational” social institutions but rather that changing languages and other social practices may produce human beings of a sort that had never before existed. The German idealists, the French revolutionaries, and the Romantic poets had in common a dim sense that human beings whose language changed so that they no longer spoke of themselves as responsible to nonhuman powers would thereby become a new kind of human beings.

The difficulty faced by a philosopher who, like myself, is sympathetic

¹ I have no criterion of individuation for distinct languages or vocabularies to offer, but I am not sure that we need one. Philosophers have used phrases like “in the language L” for a long time without worrying too much about how one can tell where one natural language ends and another begins, nor about when “the scientific vocabulary of the sixteenth century” ends and “the vocabulary of the New Science” begins. Roughly, a break of this sort occurs when we start using “translation” rather than “explanation” in talking about geographical or chronological differences. This will happen whenever we find it handy to start mentioning words rather than using them — to highlight the difference between two sets of human practices by putting quotation marks around elements of those practices.
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to this suggestion — one who thinks of himself as auxiliary to the poet rather than to the physicist — is to avoid hinting that this suggestion gets something right, that my sort of philosophy corresponds to the way things really are. For this talk of correspondence brings back just the idea my sort of philosopher wants to get rid of, the idea that the world or the self has an intrinsic nature. From our point of view, explaining the success of science, or the desirability of political liberalism, by talk of “fitting the world” or “expressing human nature” is like explaining why opium makes you sleepy by talking about its dormitive power. To say that Freud’s vocabulary gets at the truth about human nature, or Newton’s at the truth about the heavens, is not an explanation of anything. It is just an empty compliment — one traditionally paid to writers whose novel jargon we have found useful. To say that there is no such thing as intrinsic nature is not to say that the intrinsic nature of reality has turned out, surprisingly enough, to be extrinsic. It is to say that the term “intrinsic nature” is one which it would pay us not to use, an expression which has caused more trouble than it has been worth. To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is no truth. It is to say that our purposes would be served best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter, as a topic of philosophical interest, or “true” as a term which repays “analysis.” “The nature of truth” is an unprofitable topic, resembling in this respect “the nature of man” and “the nature of God,” and differing from “the nature of the positron,” and “the nature of Oedipal fixation.” But this claim about relative profitability, in turn, is just the recommendation that we in fact say little about these topics, and see how we get on.

On the view of philosophy which I am offering, philosophers should not be asked for arguments against, for example, the correspondence theory of truth or the idea of the “intrinsic nature of reality.” The trouble with arguments against the use of a familiar and time-honored vocabulary is that they are expected to be phrased in that very vocabulary. They are expected to show that central elements in that vocabulary are “inconsistent in their own terms” or that they “deconstruct themselves.” But that can never be shown. Any argument to the effect that our familiar use of a familiar term is incoherent, or empty, or confused, or vague, or “merely

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2 Nietzsche has caused a lot of confusion by inferring from “truth is not a matter of correspondence to reality” to “what we call ‘truths’ are just useful lies.” The same confusion is occasionally found in Derrida, in the inference from “there is no such reality as the metaphysicians have hoped to find” to “what we call ‘real’ is not really real.” Such confusions make Nietzsche and Derrida liable to charges of selfreferential inconsistency — to claiming to know what they themselves claim cannot be known.
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metaphorical” is bound to be inconclusive and question-begging. For
such use is, after all, the paradigm of coherent, meaningful, literal,
speech. Such arguments are always parasitic upon, and abbreviations for,
claims that a better vocabulary is available. Interesting philosophy is
rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is,
implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary
which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which
vaguely promises great things.

The latter “method” of philosophy is the same as the “method” of
utopian politics or revolutionary science (as opposed to parliamentary
politics, or normal science). The method is to redescribe lots and lots of
things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior
which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them
to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior, for exam-
ple, the adoption of new scientific equipment or new social institutions.
This sort of philosophy does not work piece by piece, analyzing concept
after concept, or testing thesis after thesis. Rather, it works holistically
and pragmatically. It says things like “try thinking of it this way” – or
more specifically, “try to ignore the apparently futile traditional ques-
tions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting ques-
tions.” It does not pretend to have a better candidate for doing the same
old things which we did when we spoke in the old way. Rather, it sug-
gests that we might want to stop doing those things and do something
else. But it does not argue for this suggestion on the basis of antecedent
criteria common to the old and the new language games. For just insofar
as the new language really is new, there will be no such criteria.

Conforming to my own precepts, I am not going to offer arguments
against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead, I am going to try to
make the vocabulary I favor look attractive by showing how it may be
used to describe a variety of topics. More specifically, in this chapter I
shall be describing the work of Donald Davidson in philosophy of lan-
guage as a manifestation of a willingness to drop the idea of “intrinsic
nature,” a willingness to face up to the contingency of the language we use.
In subsequent chapters, I shall try to show how a recognition of that
contingency leads to a recognition of the contingency of conscience, and
how both recognitions lead to a picture of intellectual and moral progress
as a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than of increasing
understanding of how things really are.

I begin, in this first chapter, with the philosophy of language because I
want to spell out the consequences of my claims that only sentences can
be true, and that human beings make truths by making languages in
which to phrase sentences. I shall concentrate on the work of Davidson
because he is the philosopher who has done most to explore these consequences. Davidson’s treatment of truth ties in with his treatment of language learning and of metaphor to form the first systematic treatment of language which breaks completely with the notion of language as something which can be adequate or inadequate to the world or to the self. For Davidson breaks with the notion that language is a medium — a medium either of representation or of expression.

I can explain what I mean by a medium by noting that the traditional picture of the human situation has been one in which human beings are not simply networks of beliefs and desires but rather beings which have those beliefs and desires. The traditional view is that there is a core self which can look at, decide among, use, and express itself by means of, such beliefs and desires. Further, these beliefs and desires are criticizable not simply by reference to their ability to cohere with one another, but by reference to something exterior to the network within which they are strands. Beliefs are, on this account, criticizable because they fail to correspond to reality. Desires are criticizable because they fail to correspond to the essential nature of the human self — because they are “irrational” or “unnatural.” So we have a picture of the essential core of the self on one side of this network of beliefs and desires, and reality on the other side. In this picture, the network is the product of an interaction between the two, alternately expressing the one and representing the other. This is the traditional subject-object picture which idealism tried and failed to replace, and which Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, James, Dewey, Goodman, Sellars, Putnam, Davidson and others have tried to replace without entangling themselves in the idealists’ paradoxes.

One phase of this effort of replacement consisted in an attempt to substitute “language” for “mind” or “consciousness” as the medium out of which beliefs and desires are constructed, the third, mediating, element between self and world. This turn toward language was thought of as a progressive, naturalizing move. It seemed so because it seemed easier to give a causal account of the evolutionary emergence of language-using organisms than of the metaphysical emergence of consciousness out of nonconsciousness. But in itself this substitution is ineffective. For if we stick to the picture of language as a medium, something

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3 I should remark that Davidson cannot be held responsible for the interpretation I am putting on his views, nor for the further views I extrapolate from his. For an extended statement of that interpretation, see my “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth,” in Ernest Lepore, ed., Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984). For Davidson’s reaction to this interpretation, see his “After-thoughts” to “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” in Alan Malachowski, Reading Rorty (Oxford: Blackwell, in press).
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standing between the self and the nonhuman reality with which the self seeks to be in touch, we have made no progress. We are still using a subject-object picture, and we are still stuck with issues about skepticism, idealism, and realism. For we are still able to ask questions about language of the same sort we asked about consciousness.

These are such questions as: “Does the medium between the self and reality get them together or keep them apart?” “Should we see the medium primarily as a medium of expression — of articulating what lies deep within the self? Or should we see it as primarily a medium of representation — showing the self what lies outside it?” Idealist theories of knowledge and Romantic notions of the imagination can, alas, easily be transposed from the jargon of “consciousness” into that of “language.” Realistic and moralistic reactions to such theories can be transposed equally easily. So the seesaw battles between romanticism and moralism, and between idealism and realism, will continue as long as one thinks there is a hope of making sense of the question of whether a given language is “adequate” to a task — either the task of properly expressing the nature of the human species, or the task of properly representing the structure of nonhuman reality.

We need to get off this seesaw. Davidson helps us do so. For he does not view language as a medium for either expression or representation. So he is able to set aside the idea that both the self and reality have intrinsic natures, natures which are out there waiting to be known. Davidson’s view of language is neither reductionist nor expansionist. It does not, as analytical philosophers sometimes have, purport to give reductive definitions of semantical notions like “truth” or “intentionality” or “reference.” Nor does it resemble Heidegger’s attempt to make language into a kind of divinity, something of which human beings are mere emanations. As Derrida has warned us, such an apotheosis of language is merely a transposed version of the idealists’ apotheosis of consciousness.

In avoiding both reductionism and expansionism, Davidson resembles Wittgenstein. Both philosophers treat alternative vocabularies as more like alternative tools than like bits of a jigsaw puzzle. To treat them as pieces of a puzzle is to assume that all vocabularies are dispensable, or reducible to other vocabularies, or capable of being united with all other vocabularies in one grand unified super vocabulary. If we avoid this assumption, we shall not be inclined to ask questions like “What is the place of consciousness in a world of molecules?” “Are colors more mind-dependent than weights?” “What is the place of value in a world of fact?” “What is the place of intentionality in a world of causation?” “What is the relation between the solid table of common sense and the unsolid table