



9: Words . . . and Things

Jon and Alan enter from opposite sides.

Alan Hello there, Urchfont, how are you?

Jon Hello there, Bleaney.

Alan Hello . . . what was that little philosophical paper you were telling me about in Common Room – ‘Hegel’s Moral Doubts’? I think you said it was?

Jon Oh, that – well, it’s not really a paper so much as an annotation which I’ve run up for the proceedings of the Aristotelean Society. It’s certainly no *Principia* – shall I fire ahead?

Dudley walks on and then goes off.

Alan Oh, yes.

Jon Now, Wittgenstein says, does he not – rather ham-handedly in my opinion – in the Blue and Brown books, that the statement, ‘fetch me that slab’ implies there is a slab, such that were I to fetch it, the statement ‘fetch me that slab’ would be disjunctively denied by the opposite statement.

Alan Yes.

Jon Well, it seems to me that Wittgenstein has made rather a bad blunder here, for as far as I can see the un fetched slab can claim to exist really no more than the unseen tree in the quad.

Alan No, no – I think you’re making a rather primitive category mistake here.

Jon Surely not.

Alan Oh no, you’re not, it’s me. I’m terribly sorry.

Jon No, no, no – it seems to me that what we have here is an example of a synthetic *a priori* proposition of the sort, ‘there are are no sense data which are both blue and green all over at the same time *and* sense data’, which is a statement really both about our world as we know it in the Wittgenstein sense of everything that is the case, and also a statement about our language as we use it. Now I know you get very worked up about propositional disjunctive functions, Bleaney, so I thought you might like to deal with the whole . . .

Alan Yes.

- Jon I see . . . well, tell me, are you using 'yes' in its affirmative sense here?
- Alan No, no. I liked that paper. I liked it, you see, because it bears on something I am considering myself, namely what part – what *role* we as philosophers play in this great heterogenous, confusing and confused jumble of political, social and economic relationships we call Society. I mean, other people have *jobs* to do, don't they – what do people do these days? . . .
- Jon They chop down trees.
- Alan They chop down trees, they drive buses or they play games.
- Jon Yes, that's very important – they *play* games.
- Alan Now, *we* also play games, but we as philosophers play *language* games. Games of language. Now, when you and I go onto the cricket pitch, we do so secure in the knowledge that a game of cricket is in the offing. But when we play language games we do so rather in order to find out what game it is we are playing. In other words, why do we do philosophy at all? Why?
- Jon Why yes, why yes . . . no, no. I think I must take exception with you on that point, Bleaney, for it seems we want to ask not so much *why* questions as *how* questions.
- Alan Why?
- Jon Well, there you are – need I say more?
- Alan Yes.
- Jon Well, I shall. It seems to me that philosophers – or at least they like to *call* themselves philosophers – who start off by asking 'why' questions end up by making pseudo-statements of the sort . . . 'Saturday got into bed with me.'
- Alan Is that a pseudo-statement?
- Jon Well, I'll take one from real life in that case to hammer home the point . . . 'There is too much Tuesday in my beetroot salad', or something of that general sort.
- Alan I think that is perfectly obvious, but I don't think you are saying – and I don't think you *would* say, would you – that these statements are in themselves meaningless.
- Jon Oh, good heavens, no. All I am saying, really, is that such statements are in themselves metaphysical statements.
- Alan Metaphysical statements? Ah well, if they are metaphysical statements I do not think we should forget – or I don't think *you* should forget – as Bradley pointed out, that a man who

- rejects the existence of metaphysics is simply a metaphysician with a rival theory of his own. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear.
- Jon Yes, yes . . . ouch! In that case, allow me to illustrate with an example from real life.
- Alan You seem very fond of real life.
- Jon Well, yes. Say we meet a friend, say at the factory, or in the pub, or at a football match – we don't say to that friend, do we, 'Why are you?' . . . it would be quite absurd to say 'Why are you?' – no, we say, 'How are you?'.
- Alan So we do. In this connection, what do you think of Plato and Aristotle and C. S. Lewis?
- Jon Well, it seems to me that while Plato and Aristotle and C. S. Lewis – by the way, how is he?
- Alan Oh, he's quite well.
- Jon Oh, I am glad. Now it seems to me that while they had very interesting things to say about the society which they represent . . .
- Alan He's been having a bit of bother with his teeth. They're not what they were.
- Jon Oh, poor fellow.
- Alan In fact they're not *where* they were. They're out. It's a great loss to scholarship.
- Jon Oh, I am sorry to hear that. But as I was saying, while these people –
- Alan What people?
- Jon Plato, Aristotle and poor old toothless Lewis – were asking questions about life and death which are therefore entirely irrelevant . . .
- Alan I call them not philosophers but para-philosophers.
- Jon Para-philosophers . . . how come para-philosophers?
- Alan Well, you've heard of these chaps – paratroopers – well, para-philosophers are the same, you see. Philosophers with their feet off the ground.
- Jon Yes, yes, very saucy. In that case, the burden is fair and square on your shoulders to explain to me the exact relevance philosophy *does* have to everyday life.
- Alan Yes, I can do this quite easily. This morning I went into a shop, and a shop assistant was having an argument with a customer. The shop assistant said 'yes' – 'yes', you see – and

the customer said 'What do you mean, "yes"?' – and the shop assistant said, 'I mean "yes".'

Jon This is very exciting indeed.

Alan Here is a splendid example in everyday life where two very ordinary people are asking each other what are in essence philosophical questions – 'What do you mean, "yes"?' – 'I mean "yes"' – and where I, as a philosopher, could help them.

Jon And did you?

Alan Well no – they were in rather a hurry . . .