



Does "Socrates Is Old" Imply That "Socrates Is"?

The flower and fruit of speech is meaning.
Yāska, *Nirukta* 1.19

The flower and fruit of speech is truth.
Aitareya Āraṇyaka 11.36

A real art of speaking, says the Laconian, which does not
lay hold of the truth does not and never will exist.
Plato, *Phaedrus* 260e¹

Bertrand Russell says that in such a sentence as "Socrates is old," "the tendency of language is to assume" that the word "is," connecting "Socrates" with an attributed quality, presumes in him a more or less persistent being; and argues that what we "ought" to say is that the series of events or phenomena to which we refer by the label "Socrates" has already continued for many years.² I agree that that is what we ought to mean; it is, in other words, what I do mean by such a statement. At the same

[Evidence in this essay suggests that it could not have been written before late 1944.—
ED.]

¹ With these statements compare Wilbur Marshall Urban's: "In the ultimate metaphysical context truth and intelligibility are one," and "The metaphysical idiom is the only language that is really intelligible" (*Language and Reality*, London, 1939, pp. 716, 729, and *The Intelligible World*, New York, 1929, p. 471). Whatever has no meaning is not language, but only a noise.

As Philo says: "Spoken words contain the symbols of things apprehended by the understanding only" (*De Abrahamo* 119). Here the word "contain" is proper, because the real symbols are the concrete things to which the words refer by first intention. At the same time, it must always be remembered that the verbal symbols are a species rather than the genus of language, and that the connotations of things can be as well (or sometimes even better) communicated by visual symbols. Semantics, though now restricted to the study of the significations of words, is really the study of their iconography, and is in principle the same thing as the study of the intentions of visual symbols.

² Bertrand Russell, "Logical Atomism," in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, First Series, cited and discussed by Wilbur Marshall Urban in *Language and Reality*, pp. 285 ff.

time, I think we have a right to make use of such elliptical expressions for practical purposes, without incurring any charge of bad faith, even though we know that our full or real meaning will only be understood by a hearer who is not only aware that a real "being" of anything that can be named or tagged can be very seriously questioned, but is also aware that we do not, in fact, attribute a persistent "being" to any composite or variable, subject to change and decay. Such a hearer will recognize that I am not "lying," but only speaking "common current English" in order to avoid a language of such complication as would tend to paralyze all communication about everyday affairs. It is true that another hearer who assumes that "Socrates" must have a being may assume that I agree with him; but it is more likely that he does not consider the ultimate meaning at all. In such contexts all that is needed is a communication of the empirical or surface meaning; it may be supposed that the hearer is in search of "Socrates," the man, and only wants to know what sort of man to be on the look out for; it is only if he raises the question of the implications of my words that it will be needful for me to interpret them.

Before going further, I must ask, What can Bertrand Russell mean by his personification of language? It is, surely, only human beings that can have "tendencies to assume" anything whatever. If the proposition "Socrates is old" implies that "Socrates is," it must be the human assumption that has determined the form of the expression, and not the language itself that leads us to suppose that Socrates is simple. Language can never be misunderstood: it is human beings who can misunderstand one another, which happens when what is voiced is actually a mere noise, or seems to be a mere noise because the hearer hears but does not understand. No doubt it has been more or less generally assumed that I and others "are" persistent beings; and it is this *suppositio* that can alone explain a universe of discourse in which it is both meant and understood that Socrates is. At the same time, we must be very careful not to confuse this personalism³ with the metaphysical animism that refers the acts of the so-called beings to the presence in (or to) them of a Power that moves them—*questi nei cor mortali è permotore*—the pervasive Power of another than "themselves," and apart from which they could no more "run" than any other engine without "power." In this universe of discourse, that "Socrates is old" will not imply that Socrates is, but much rather that "he" is not.

³ By "personalism" (Philo's *oἰσμός*, Indian *ahamkāra*), I mean an identification of the *persona* (mask), personality, or personification with the very Person of any agent: in other words, any confusion of the disguise with the actor.

Thus the meaning of the words "Socrates is old" will depend in part upon the universe of discourse in which they are spoken. To the philosopher in any traditional sense they will not mean that Socrates "is." For it is no new discovery of modern positivism that *I* "is merely a name for a series of atomic events"; this is a traditional doctrine, integral to the *Philosophia Perennis*, and of unknown antiquity. In Plato's words: "Although a man is called 'himself,' still he is never at all such that he retains the selfsame properties in 'himself'; he is forever becoming a new man . . . not only in his body but in his soul, nothing of his moral disposition (*τὰ ἡθη*), opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, or fears ever remaining the same in any individual (*ἐκάστῳ*) . . . nor are we ever the same selves as regards the content of our knowledge" (*Symposium* 207^{DE}, 208^A); and so, he says also, "it naturally belongs to whatever is compounded (*σύνθετος*) to suffer a corresponding dissolution," and it is only to a real and immutable being that it belongs to be and ever remain itself; so that things that are named, such as men, horse, or garments, although the naming seems to imply that they "are," are not really essences, and never the same; this applies to everything sensibly perceptible, and it is only the invisible and simple substances of which it can properly be said that they "are" (*Phaedo* 78c-79a). Similarly for Plutarch: "Nobody remains one person, nor is one person . . . and if he is not the same person, he has no permanent being, but changes his very nature as one personality in him succeeds to another. Our senses, through ignorance of reality (*τὸ ὄν*, what 'is'), falsely tell us that what appears to be, is" (*Moralia* 392^{DE}, cf. Philo, *De cherubim* 113 ff.). And so "the fastidious soul can rest her understanding on nothing that has name. . . . We must have symbols (*gelichnisse*) . . . [but] our understanding of them is totally unlike the thing as it is in itself and as it is in God. . . . I have always before my mind this little word, *quasi*, 'like'; children at school call it an 'adjective' (*biwort*)" (Eckhart, Pfeiffer ed., pp. 552, 331-332, 271). Language, in fact (and however "scientific"), is essentially conditioned by "the philosophy of 'As if'"; and this is only overlooked by fundamentalists and a majority of scientists, for whom all communication is only of literal facts, the "bread alone" of conversation.⁴

⁴ Hence the supposed conflict of science and religion; cf. Coomaraswamy, "Gradation and Evolution: I," *Isis*, XXXV (1944), 15-16; and "Gradation and Evolution: II," *Isis*, XXXVIII (1947), 87-94.

The "bread alone" of discourse suffices for all "practical purposes" in our modern world of "impoverished reality," but is not sufficient for the expression or communication of the whole of human experience, of which only a part is recognized by "science."

In India it has been consistently maintained that our true Self can only be described by a negation of whatever qualities (relations) can be predicated of it. This *via remotionis* represented by the *neti neti*⁵ of the Upanishads and by the axiom that birth and death are inseparable correlatives is strongly developed in Buddhism, where we meet with a repeated analysis of "personality" (*atta-bhāva*) in terms of its five psycho-physical components, to each of which, because of its impermanence (*anicca*), the words "that is not my Self" (*na me so attā*) apply (*Nikāyas, passim*), and it is emphasized that "whatever has been born, has come to be (*bhūtam*), and is compounded, is a naturally corruptible thing" (*paloka-dhamma*, D II.113). Whoever, then, understands things "as-become" (*yathā-bhūtam*), i.e., in the natural sequence of causes and effects, will not ask: What 'was' *I*, What 'am' *I*, or What shall *I* 'be'? (S II.26, 27). This is the familiar doctrine of *anattā*, that there is no "self" recognized in the constituents of personality, which are nothing but a chain of causally determined factors. At the same time, the Buddhist adept (Arhat), no less than the Wake aware that "I am naught of an anyone anywhere" (A II.177), "neither 'brahman,' 'prince,' nor 'farmer,' nor anyone at all" (Sn 455), is allowed to say "I" for convenience—even as a Bertrand Russell might, even though he knows that "he" is nothing but a series of events that had a starting point in time and will come to an end; the Buddhist master may possibly be misunderstood by an untaught personalist, but there is little danger that he will be misunderstood within the community of discourse⁶ to which he belongs, that of the monastic order, or even by instructed laymen.

Alike in Indian, Islamic, and Christian contexts we meet with the thought that God alone *is* and that He alone can properly say "I"; as Meister Eckhart puts it, "*Ego*, the word 'I,' is proper to none but God in his sameness" (Pfeiffer ed., p. 261), although, indeed, "we have no means for considering what God is, but rather how he is not" (St. Thomas

⁵ I.e., to whatever can be predicated of the Self, as distinguished from its accidents, the answer is "No, no." *Neti* is "no" in quotes.

⁶ Community, or universe of discourse: Skt. *samāhāya-sambhāṣā, sāhitya* or *saṃgha*, all etymologically cognate with syn-thesis. The nature of a universe of discourse is well illustrated by a gloss cited by Meister Eckhart (Evans ed., II, 65): "No one can understand or teach the Pauline writings unless he be of the same mind in which Paul spoke and wrote," or William Law's "Would you know the truths of Jacob Belmen you must stand where he stood." This has an important bearing on the problem of translation, for which a knowledge of grammar alone, however scholarly, is an inadequate qualification. Real translation is only possible when the translator has himself already experienced (*erlebt*) something of that which his author is communicating.

Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.* 1.3.1).⁷ In other words, this is a point of view that has been almost universally entertained; and so it can be said that it is perhaps only to the modern and untaught "man in the street" that the proposition "Socrates is old" will really imply that "Socrates is." To anyone who has been taught, it will appear that the proposition, on the contrary, denies to "Socrates" a being; for he will be aware that whatever is now old, must have been young, and will be older, and that in our experience, exclusively of past and future, there is no "now" in which we would pin him down, to say that he *is* this or that. This man, Socrates, is nowhere to be found.

We have seen that there is an ambiguity of meaning in the predication, which may be differently understood on the one hand by a personalist and on the other hand by a positivist or any traditional philosopher.⁸ So far I agree with Professor Urban; but I cannot agree with his analysis of the nature of the ambiguity.⁹ He says that Socrates is not a persistent being in the practical, physiological sense, but is so in his moral and po-

⁷ This is as much as to say that it is only the *how* of phenomena that can be described; their *what* eludes us. All language not merely indicative must be metaphorical or symbolic; or if not, must resort to negations. I agree with Professor Urban that whatever cannot be expressed literally is not therefore unreal, but simply neither true nor false; no relative terms, such as young or old, or good or evil, can communicate its essence; the relatives are only the names of its modalities, and not *its* name. God, as Nicholas of Cusa says, is hidden from us by these pairs of contraries; and these are the "Clashing Rocks" of the great tradition, between which none can pass without being docked of a characteristic appendage, to wit, his outer man; this contingent "self" being, in fact, his "sop to Cerberus."

⁸ So far—viz. as to the mutability and consequent unreality of all that can be perceived, measured, and named—modern positivism and the traditional philosophy agree; the existence of "things" is what they do. But whereas for the positivist there are no realities whatever, the realist, who is also a nominalist with respect to phenomena, affirms the reality of which the things that can be named are the phenomena, and employs their names as adequate symbols without which no discourse about their reality would be possible. Positivism is a "nothing-morist" (*nāstika, natihika*) doctrine, and as such, as Professor Urban says, "would eliminate whole areas of human discourse as meaningless and unintelligible," adding that the taking up of such a stand may be "a symptom of a decaying culture and a prelude to a scientific barbarism and a cultural nihilism"; cf. René Guénon, *Le Règne de la quantité et les signes des temps*, Paris, 1944 [English tr., London 1953—ed.], and Iredell Jenkins, "The Postulate of an Impoverished Reality," *Journal of Philosophy*, XXXIX (1942).

⁹ William Marshall Urban, *Language and Reality*, p. 266. Since I am at variance with him on this one point I should like to say that I am in full agreement with nearly everything else in his book, and notably with the conclusion that "the metaphorical idiom of the Great Tradition is the only language that is really intelligible."

litical aspect. But, assuredly, it is not only our physical, but also our moral and political nature that is changeable; is not the soul subject to persuasion? In the traditional philosophy at least, the soul is as much as the body a thing that becomes, according to the food that it assimilates (cf. *Phaedrus* 246c); τὰ ἥθη, as Plato says, are never constant in any individual, while the Buddhist holds that it is even more dangerous to identify the soul with our Self than the body. That "Socrates is old" cannot, in any superior universe of discourse, mean that Socrates "is," but, on the contrary, implicitly denies that he "is."

It will be only if we predicate in "Socrates" an authentically constant property, some "absolute," that "is" will imply a veritable essence. In this case, however, we shall have to ask, What do we *now* mean by "Socrates"? we cannot be referring to this man, So-and-so, subject to inveteration. If we say that "Socrates is infallible," then we *are* attributing a being to "Socrates," because infallibility is not a more-or-less attribute but, like "perfection," without degree, and therefore immutable. This will be even more obvious, perhaps, if we say that "Socrates is immortal"; for this is as much as to say "eternal, immortal, and selfsame" (*ἰσάμωτος, Phaedo* 79d), and will necessarily mean that we are referring to a "Socrates" that has never been born. Both propositions are like Aristotle's "vous is never wrong" (*De anima* III.10.433a).

The notion of an infallibility attributed to any individual properly offends us; the notion is irrational. For, indeed, as this man, Socrates, says himself: "It is the Truth that you cannot gainsay; Socrates you easily may" (*Symposium* 201c, cf. *Apology* 23a). When, then, is "Socrates" infallible? When it is not "himself" that speaks, but the "voice from the Acropolis" (*Timaeus* 70); the voice, that is to say, of Socrates' and everyman's immanent Daimon, "who cares for nothing but the truth" and is "a very near relative of mine, living in the same house with me" (*Hippias major* 288b, 304d); in other words, our soul's immortal and divine part (*Timaeus* 73d, 90a) and our real Self (*Laus* 959AB), Philo's "Soul of the soul" (*Heres* 55), St. Paul's πνεῦμα as distinguished from the ψυχή (Heb. 4:12), and the Indian "self's immortal Self and Leader" (*MU* VI.7). When, then, we say that Socrates is infallible, "Socrates" is no longer a label for the man that was once young, and is ever getting older, but a symbol standing for that man's very Self, the Self of all men, that "never becomes anyone." It is the same when we speak of the Pope's infallibility, viz. when he speaks oracularly (*ex cathedra*), and the ref-

erence is not to this or that Pope, Pius or Gregory, but to the Sanctus Spiritus, whose *cathedra* is in heaven and who teaches from within the heart (St. Augustine, *In ep. Joannis ad Parthos*). What can the Pope as a man *know* about the Truth? he can only believe; for "Omne verum, a quocumque dicatur, est a Spiritu Sancto" (St. Ambrose on 1 Cor. 12:3). "Pope," as being "infallible," is an office, not a name, and as such a symbol that stands for another than "this man." "Not I, the I that I am, knows these things, but God in me" (Jacob Boehme).

Now, if Bertrand Russell asserts that the Holy Ghost does not exist,¹³ and that, therefore, my sentences are meaningless, I shall agree with the first part of his proposition, since God is properly called nothing, i.e., no thing amongst others; it will not, in fact, be overlooked that in propositions that do attribute a real being to their subject, the form of predication is typically negative, the negation implying an absence of any or all of those qualities of which there can be more or less. I shall not agree with his second part, but only say that if my sentences are meaningless to him, that is because his universe of discourse is not identical with mine; his is a universe of discourse only about things that are never the same.¹⁴ It may be worthwhile to observe here that a Hindu, even in the vernacular, does not say that "I am cold," but that "Cold adheres to me" (*ham ko thandā lagā*); the *suppositio* being that I, my Self, remain to be discovered by a process of remotion from all those accidents by which my being is veiled and from which I must escape if I would be authentically what I am.

¹³ Existence is necessarily in terms of space and time, from which the language of *metaphysical* discourse, concerned with the nature of reality in an unextended here and now, as necessarily abstracts. Therefore, it constantly resorts to paradoxes or negations such as "motion without locomotion." But merely because of this enigmatic phrasology we must not overlook (unless we are willing to throw away "the baby with the bath") that, as Professor Urban says (p. 708), "these idioms are an expression of authentic experiences which can be communicated, and which are confirmed or authenticated precisely in these processes of communication." When, for example, we say that "my mind was elsewhere," our reference is actually to a motion without locomotion and to a possible omnipresence. On the other hand, if on looking at an excellent portrait we say "that's me," we are literally talking nonsense, just as we are if we say that "Socrates is old." Not even our everyday language is literally intelligible; even the "language" of mathematics cannot be explained in terms of experience, because it deals with only a fraction of human experience, of which the most valuable part is immeasurable. The language of metaphysics applies to the whole of reality; its universals are not ex- but in-clusive.

¹⁴ "Things that are never the same" is, of course, a tautology. Such is the nature of "things."

To sum up, it appears that a real ambiguity lies in the verb to "be" which, as an English word, can mean either to "become" or to "be";¹² which of these meanings is to be understood in a given proposition depending on the nature of the quality or property attributed to the subject of the proposition; a variable quality or property implies a variable subject, and conversely. In German one could better distinguish *ist geworden* *alt* from *ist unfehlbar*, in Greek *πρόσβυς ἐγένετο* from *ἐστίν ἀθανάτος*, or in Sanskrit *jīrṇo bābhūva* from *amṛtō'sti*; the first terms implying processes, and the latter simple aspects of being. That modern English has not (except in the rare expression, "Woe worth") preserved the Anglo-Saxon *weorðan* (G. *werden*, Lat. *vertere*, Skr. *vyt*) represents a real loss of expressive power. In many other cases, in the "common current English" of today, words or phrases (or in the same way visual or enacted symbols)¹³ have lost their primary intentions and retain only their indicative values.¹⁴ To the extent that we forget that "illustrate" and

¹² See, on this subject, the discussion by C.A.F. Rhys Davids, *To Become or Not to Become* (London, 1937), rightly dedicated to "fellow-translators." Note especially the contrast presented in A 11.37-39 where, in reply to questions, the Buddha answers: "No, I shall not *become* a Deva, Gandharva, or Yakṣa," and concludes with: "I *am* Buddha." This "am" corresponds to the "That art thou" of the Upaniṣads, where it is a question of the absolute *being* of the immanent and immortal Self, and the verb to "be" is required, because it would be nonsense to imply that what is mortal could *become* immortal. "Becoming" can only have to do with the *process* of remembering and realizing what we are or who we are (Γνωθι σεαυτόν), not with this what itself. Rhys David's book is of the highest value in its bearing on the problems of translation, but it is vitiated throughout by her own phobia of the notion of an absolute *being*, to which she would prefer an endless *progress*.

¹³ What were originally rites, for example, survive only as ceremonies, i.e., merely in their utilitarian or decorative aspects. This applies to all the arts, of which the techniques themselves, e.g., of sculpture or weaving, are naturally symbolic. In sculpture, for example, one either imposes a form upon the clay (*via affirmativa*) or discovers a form in the wood or stone (the more that one removes, the nearer one comes to the formless source in which the forms inhere), and this is the metaphysics of the impropriety of modeling in clay a form that is to be copied, not in metal, but in stone. In weaving, the warp threads are the "rays" of the Intelligible Sun (in many primitive looms they still proceed from a single point), and the wool is the Primary Matter of the cosmic "tissue." When these things have been altogether forgotten, in a world of "impoverished reality," then the work, which originally served the needs of body and soul together, becomes either a mechanical task or a pastime.

¹⁴ When the "virtue" has gone out of any word, this is not merely a semantic fact, but an indication that a similar virtue has gone out of the activity to which the word directly refers. In metaphysical discourse it is very often necessary to use current words in their archaic or obsolete senses, i.e., more exactly than in the shop-worn speech of commerce or the emotive speech of politics. "Every term that

"argument" imply to "throw light upon" and to "clarify," or that *métier* is etymologically *ministerium*,¹⁵ or that the original meaning of such words as "nature" (originally of things, but now denoting an aggregate of the things themselves), "art" (now used for "works of art"), or "inspiration" (now very commonly used to mean "external stimulant") has been actually materialized, these expressions have become clichés or superstitions for us, who use them only for indicative purposes.¹⁶ In fact, as I have said elsewhere, "if we exclude from our theological and metaphysical thinking all those symbols, images, and theories that have come down to us from the Stone Age, our means of communication would be almost wholly limited to the field of empirical observation and the statistical predictions (laws of science) that are based on these observations; the world would have lost its meaning."¹⁷ The original symbols, as a well known archaeologist has said, "were anchored in the highest, not the lowest"; there subsisted in them "a polar balance of physical and

becomes an empty slogan as the result of fashion or repetition is born at some time from a definite concept, and its significance must be interpreted from that point of view" (Paul Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, New York, 1943, p. 286); and what is true of the verbal is equally true of visual symbols, which always had their reasons long before they became mere "art forms."

¹⁵ It is partly because we no longer realize (verily) that a vocation, or trade (= *way of life*, Skr. *ācārya*) is properly a ministry (in both the political and sacerdotal senses of the word) that we cannot "understand" a caste system, i.e., cannot imagine what a social order could be like in which the notions of honor and hereditary function coincide. Any such loss of a capacity to understand represents a constriction of our "world"; and, in fact, whatever we cannot understand we try to eliminate from the world, usually by "giving the dog a bad name." Our way of saying "no" to anything is, logically enough, to call it naughty. In this word "naughty" (Skr. *asat*, in this sense) the *suppositio* is that *ens et bonum convertuntur*; and, similarly, in the case of German *Unthat* (Skr. *akṛtam*, in this sense), literally "un-deed," and hence "sin," the sinner himself being "not in act," and as such, as St. Thomas Aquinas says, really non-existent. If we ignore the *suppositio*, the words themselves have little more than an exclamatory value and hardly any real meaning.

¹⁶ In the same way phrases such as "our better self," "be yourself," "came to himself" and "self-government" and "self-control" (i.e., of self by Self, *le moi by le soi*) are not understood (*erlebt*) if we overlook their *suppositio*, equally Platonic, Scholastic, Islamic, Indian, and Chinese, that *Duo sunt in homine*. It is precisely when we have not really understood the implications of such a term as "self-government" that we are most liable to make a fetish of it. It has often been asserted by rationalists that religion has been "the opium of the people"; however that may be, it is quite certain that the modern shibboleths of "race," "equality," "democracy," and notably, "progress," are the people's drugs, and that they are deliberately administered as such by politicians and advertisers.

¹⁷ *Speculum*, XIX (1944), 123.

metaphysical" (denotation and implication, use and meaning), but they have been "more and more emptied on their way down to us."¹⁸

Moreover, to the extent that we have "overspecialized," and do not understand one another, we are "idiots"—etymologically "peculiar individuals," and so peculiar as to be excluded from whole continents of the normally human universe of discourse. Scientist and theologian, maker and consumer, philosopher and folk no longer understand one another; and we talk of the "mysterious East" in a way that would have been impossible in the Middle Ages. It sometimes seems that the more our means of communication are improved and multiplied, the less are we really able to understand one another, and that the more we know of less and less, the more impossible it becomes to understand our own past. It would be difficult to imagine a culture more provincial than is that of the average educated man of today.¹⁹

So our discussion leads us back to the "miracle of language."²⁰ The very facts that we can communicate with one another, that we can translate from another, even an ancient, language into our own, and that the human and noninstinctive universe of discourse is so much more really universal than is often supposed, call for an explanation.²¹ Communication implies a communicator and a communicant; if the latter under-

¹⁸ Walter Andrae, *Die ionische Säule: Bauform oder Symbol* (Berlin, 1933), p. 65 [cf. review of this book in Vol. I of this edition—ED.].

¹⁹ There was a time when all civilizations were so much alike that a traveller could feel at home wherever he went; Plato was better understood by Philo and Plotinus, Marsilio Ficino, and Peter Sterry than he can be by any modern nominalist; however learned; and "the greater the ignorance of modern times, the deeper grows the darkness of the Middle Ages." Archaeological discoveries and anthropological investigations have done but little to widen our horizons, mainly because our eyes have been blinded to their meaning by our own belief in "progress" (i.e., by the application of evolutionary concepts to culture) and by the pathetic fallacy (which attributes to primitive man our own aestheticism).

²⁰ An expression used by Professor Urban. Cf. also R. A. Wilson, *The Birth of Language* (London, 1937); and E. Dacqué, *Das verlorene Paradies* (Munich, 1938).

²¹ The different human cultures being, as Alfred Jeremias said, the dialects of one and the same spiritual language. Its idioms are recognizable everywhere, alike in folklore and in the classical literatures. Without knowledge of these idioms, a history of literature is impossible; without it we cannot distinguish between an individual poet's inventions and universal formulae, between *le symbolisme qui cherche* and *le symbolisme qui sait*. In words we must "distinguish at least the subjective symbol of psychological association from the objective symbol of precise intellectual meaning. The latter implies some knowledge of the doctrine of analogy" (Walter Shewring in *Weekly Review*, August 17, 1944), which Philo calls "the laws of allegory." Without a knowledge of the meaning of verbal or visual symbols a real history of ideas is inconceivable.

stands the former, although in his own way, this implies the existence of a something in common, and *a priori* with respect to the particular communication. "I love you" will be meaningless if we have *no* prior conception of what it might be "to be loved"; in other words, experience (*Erlebnis*, Skr. *anubhava*) must have preceded recognition. It is true that the content of "I love you" may range from the lowest levels of desire to the highest of identity; but language is capable of conveying also shades of meaning, and, for example, when Rūmī says: "What is love? Thou shalt know when thou becomest me," it is obvious that he is not speaking of love as desire.

But the difficulty of understanding one another, or of understanding our own past, is greater now than it has ever been; our "science" knows of "love" only as a chemical reaction, and the "quest of immortality, the effort of men and women to master matter by spirit, is the chief intellectual preoccupation of the men and women *outside* the sphere of 'civilization' today."²² Our universe of discourse has long been undergoing a process of contraction, mainly by an elimination of values from the symbols that once implied both facts and values; and it is precisely this elimination of values from our minds that prevents us from understanding the normal cultures in which the notion of value predominates. We can only communicate with what remains of traditional civilizations on the level of a *lowest* common denominator, for which the vocabulary of "basic" English will probably suffice. There is little or nothing in a modern American education to qualify a man for converse with a Tibetan or Indian peasant—not to mention a scholar; all we *can* do together is "eat, drink, and be merry."

It is, however, the fact that a mutual understanding is *possible*, the fact that even the most despatialized and detemporalized experiences, insofar as they can be referred to by adequate symbols in any language, can also be referred to in any other, the fact that there can never be laid a valid claim to any property in ideas, that remains to be explained. The excesses of evolutionism are past; the philologist no longer maintains that a non-instinctive language capable of expressing ideas can have been developed from the cries of animals; there is an art of speaking, and the crying of babies and the gambolling of lambs is not an art, but instinctive.

What is the "mutuality of minds," or the "common good," that makes

²² K. N. Chadwick, *Poetry and Prophecy* (Cambridge, 1942), p. 94 (italics mine). With the general thesis of this book, cf. Paul Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher* (New York, 1927).

their "contact" possible? Some kind of transcendental, metempirical explanation of the "common denominator" is inevitable. If a common experience can be shared by two "individual" minds, if both can "recognize" the same object or idea, this can only mean that the minds in question, say those of a Chinese and an American, are not so individually and empirically distinct from one another as might have been inferred from the fact of the spatial distinction of the Chinese and American bodies, "in which" we think of them as functioning. If a mutual understanding has been only partial, we can speak of a like-mindedness; but to the extent that a complete understanding subsists, the notion of a kind of unanimity, or *one-mindedness*, is forced upon us. In more than one sense, mind transcends both space and time. Another way of putting this would be to say that truth is universal, and that only misunderstandings of truths, or what amounts to the same, only untruths, are peculiar to individuals.

The word "denominator" (in the expression "common denominator") is itself significant in this connection; for naming implies understanding, and the primary meaning of the word "denominator" is that of a "giver of names." To speak of the "common denominator" is, then, as much as to say that it is "Adam," the Man in us, and not this man So-and-so, that recognizes and understands. In the Old Testament story we are told that Adam named the animals; and it is obvious that the latter had not then, and have not since, named themselves. The giving of names endows the factors of the passing show with a permanent existence in our mental world; and our total experience is therefore one of "name *and* appearance" (Skr. *nāma-rūpa*), not alone of sensation. The fact that names have a permanent meaning enables us to understand not only our contemporaries, but also those of our ancestors, whose words have been transmitted, whether orally or in writing.²³ It is because our speech,

²³ As Florian Znaniecki has remarked, "the golden period of Greek philosophy is thus characterized with respect to this problem by an assumption of the community of the essential, conceptual part of contents and the community of the rational perfect meanings corresponding to it and determined by it, while the varying individual meanings of objects were assumed to be determined by the individually differentiated, unessential, sensual part of contents" (*Cultural Reality*, Chicago, 1919, p. 88). This is as much as to say that meanings are objective and intrinsic for those who know, but subjective and arbitrary for those "independent" thinkers who construct their own philosophies. Any misuse of words or visual symbols reflects an ignorance of their proper meanings and is useless for purposes of communication. And so, as Plato asks: Why consider the inferior philosophers? That words have a permanent meaning, however evanescent their enunciation, or the

as the *Rg Veda* says, retains the signatures (*lakṣmih*) of the contemplative "denominators" who first wedded speech to mind (*manasā vācam akṛata*, RV x.71.2), without which speech is a mere babbling (SB III.2.4.11). So, as Jacob Boehme says, it is the Spirit that manifests and reveals itself in the sound with the voice; to hear and to understand are two different things; we only understand one another when signatures and images are entertained in common; and "by this we know that all human properties proceed from One; that they have only one root and mother; otherwise one man could not understand another in the sound . . . the inward manifests itself in the sound of the word, for that is the mind's natural knowledge of itself" (*Signatura rerum* 1.1-5).

In speaking, then, of a common denominator as the basis of all mutual understanding and possibility of argument or clarification, we are referring not to a lowest but to a *highest* common denominator; and, in fact, not to "ourselves" but to our common Self, the Self of all beings, the omniscient fount of memory (MU VI.7, CU VII.26.1), and only seer, hearer, thinker, speaker, and knower in us (BU III.7.23 and 8.11). The "common denominator" is that one *qui intus corda docet* and *ex quo omne verum, a quocumque dicatur* proceeds; a merely family likeness of minds, presumed to be as distinct from one another as our bodies are, does not suffice for unanimity. The possibility of mutual understanding presupposes a common experience, and more than any single mind can ever have experienced in a single lifetime. In other words, the fact of linguistic communication, the possibility of what we call "learning," presupposes the Platonic and Indian concept of Recollection,²⁴ that there is a better part of us that knows already whatever we seem to learn, but of which we are in reality only reminded by the spoken word.

Common universes of discourse will correspond to those areas of this latent knowledge of which the parties involved are already conscious, and under these circumstances discourse can be readily conducted even when the language employed is very technical or reduced to almost algebraic terms; theologian and theologian, or physicist and physicist, for example,

material on which they are recorded, underlies the Indian, Islamic, and Christian doctrine of the "eternity of Scripture," in which doctrine the date of promulgation is, of course, to be distinguished from the timelessness of the embodied meaning. It is a form of the doctrine of immutable ideas.

²⁴ See my "Recollection, Indian and Platonic," and "On the One and Only Transmigrant" [in this volume—ED].

can understand each other, though the layman overhearing may not have understood a word that was said, and may go so far as to call the, to him, "foreign" language a gibberish. In other cases, typically that of master and student, the purpose is to *create* a common universe of discourse by *reminding* the pupil of an area of knowledge that he possesses only potentially and can only with effort, and the help of some external "midwifery" (as Socrates used to put it), bring to life. It would be theoretically possible for all men to understand one another perfectly, and to be able to make themselves understood by anyone; actually, however, I think I have made it clear that it is, for me, only in the most superficial sense that individuals can be said to understand one another; it is an almost trite observation to remark that the more individual men are, the less they have in common. When, then, we do understand (or love) one another, it is not so much these men, you and I, distinguished by their "accidents," that understand (or love) one another as it is the Man in us that understands (and loves) himself.

Professor Urban (p. 84) maintains that "the entire marvel of intelligible communication can be *understood* only on the basis of transcendental presuppositions." Explicitly, however, he does not mean by this to claim for the *Philosophia Perennis* the status of a divine revelation; this traditional philosophy and the preeminently intelligible language in which it is expressed, notwithstanding that "there is that in it which is timeless and, in principle, irrefutable," he calls a product of human thought (p. 728).

There is not so much divergence here as might appear; so much depends upon what we mean by "human" and what by "thought." I think he would agree that it is not the sensitive outer man who hears the sounds, but our intellectual or spiritual Inner Man that understands; and only might not agree that this Inner Man is the Person of an immanent deity whose throne is in heaven. I need not quarrel with him if he replies that the kingdom of heaven is within you, but should only add, within *and* without.

What is important for the student of the history of language and the interpreter of literature is his proposition that the implications of language are metaphysical; which will mean that the forms of words, like the iconography of the other traditional arts, have not been arbitrarily determined, but rather "well-found" than "well-made." If this is true at all, it must have been true from the beginning.

We can, then, ask: By which men, amongst the others of a primitive

community learning to speak intelligibly, were the adequate symbols "found"? The *Rg Veda* (x.71.1, cf. AV vii.1.1), comparing them to men who winnow corn, calls them "contemplatives" (*dhīrāḥ*, sometimes more loosely rendered by "wisemen"). In other words, the mantic "culture heroes" or "medicine men," by whom the arts were given to men in general, "saw" their useful inventions, and the meanings of these inventions, at one and the same time. One can no more imagine that men invented wheels and then attributed meanings to them than that they invented rituals and afterwards deduced from them the myths of which the rituals are an enactment. That is only to say that in any creative art, content (form, idea) and shape, intuition and expression, theory and practice are inseparable; and that if it is otherwise in any mere labor, such as that of a galley slave or factory hand, this only means that the theory has been forgotten by the laborer. And just as an industry without art, such as is known only to "civilized" men, is brutality, so are the modern materializations of word meanings and the reduction of visual symbols (of which the references were originally at the same time physical and metaphysical) to the level of art forms to be appreciated only as aesthetic and otherwise meaningless surfaces, symptomatic of a deviation from that human nature of which the intelligible languages are a natural function. It is not without good reason that both Plato and Mencius asserted that the misuse of words is the outward sign of a sickness of the soul.

If, indeed, the implications of language are metaphysical, the traces of this should appear in language itself. There are, in fact, many languages, notably those of a hieratic quality, such as Greek or Sanskrit, that seem to have been made expressly with a view to the clear expression of metaphysical ideas; nor can even the terms of "common current English" be properly understood apart from their metaphysical presuppositions: our word "naught-y" and Skr. *asat* in this sense, for example, implying the assumption, *ens et bonum convertuntur*. It is not at all so sure that primitive man, the creator of language, did not live more by his ideas than by facts; at any rate, it was by an application of his myth to the facts that he expected to "control" them, and there can be no doubt that he thought of names as evocations of the things named. An important example of the metaphysical bias inherent in language itself can be cited in the fact that in many of the oldest vocabularies (and with survivals in modern languages, where, however, the tendency is to give an exclusively good or bad meaning to such words as "reward," which are properly neutral)

a single root so often embodies opposite meanings; for example, in Egyptian the sign "strong-weak" must be qualified by determinants if we are to know which is meant, while in Sanskrit the same word can mean either zero or plenum; one infers that the movement of primitive logic is not abstractive from an observed multiplicity but deductive from an axiomatic unity.²⁵

Again, modern scientific and proletarian dialects tend to restrict the meanings of words to their merely denotative powers, while the more expressive languages (which we only call more picturesque) can employ the most ordinary terms with extraordinary significance; a large part of the technical language of theology, for example, is supported by the arts. It is only, in fact, when the polar balance of physical and metaphysical is preserved in a language that the whole man, who does not live by "bread alone," can communicate more than a fraction of his experience. We can still say that a girl "angled for" a man and "hooks" him, but this is for us only a rather cynical metaphor. We have forgotten that every technique had once also a spiritual significance; as we can observe if we consider in this case Meister Eckhart's "for love is like unto the fisherman's hook," and realize that he is using here, not a mere simile but the idiom of a tradition that can be recognized as well in Marsilio Ficino, in the Gospels ("fishers of men," Matt. 4:19, Mark 1:17, Luke 5:10), and in the words of Hāfiz: "Fishlike in the sea behold me swimming, till He with His hook my rescue maketh." This will be all the more apparent if we reflect that "swimming in the sea" has also its technical significance, and that in this language the fisherman's "line" stands for the "thread-spirit" or chain on which all things are strung, and by which the solar Deity "draws" all things unto himself, a concept that can be

²⁵ On the subject of verbal roots embracing contrary meanings, see Carl Abel, *Über den Gegensinn der Urworte* (Leipzig, 1884) (also in his *Sprachwissenschaftlichen Abhandlungen*, Leipzig, 1885); B. Heimann, "Deutung und Bedeutung indischer Terminologie," *XIX Congr. Internat. de Orientalisti*; "Plurality, Polarity and Unity in Hindu Thought," *BSOS*, IX, 10-5 1921; and "The Polarity of the Indefinite," *JISOA*, V (1937), 91-96; M. Fowler, "Polarity in the *Rig-veda*," *Review of Religion*, VII (1943), 115-123. As St. Thomas Aquinas says, "everything composed of contraries is necessarily corruptible," but "the principles of contraries are not themselves contrary," "our knowledge of contraries is a single knowledge," and "therefore our intellectual Self must be incorruptible" (*Sum. Theol.* 1.14.8, 1.75.6, and 1.80.1). Hence the concept that the Wall of Paradise is made of contraries (Nicholas of Cusa, *De visione Dei* 12), that of a liberation from the pairs of opposites (*Bhagavad Gītā*), and the worldwide symbols (verbal and visual) of the Symplegades, or Jaws of Death, between which the traveller to the world of immortality must pass.

traced in European literature (not to mention Babylonian, Islamic, Indian, and Chinese) from Homer to Blake.²⁶ In the same way, the Christian can speak of the soul as following the "spoor" of her quarry, Christ, and in so saying is employing the hunting idiom that Plato uses when he speaks of being "on the tracks of truth" and that underlies the Sanskrit *mārga*, "Way" (in the highest sense), from *mrg*, to "track." One other illustration: our words "beam" (of wood, German *Baum*, tree) and "beam" (shaft of light) are etymologically identical, while Pali *rukṅga*, tree, is a derivative of *ruc*, to shine, and related to *lux*, light, as is *lux* itself to *lucus*, grove; and it will be seen that here are implications that reappear in the concept of a *Branstock*, *Rubus Igneus* and Burning Bush. Linguistic studies have often been employed for ethnographical purposes; it is, for example, inferred from existing vocabularies that a people who spoke a proto-Indo-Aryan language must have lived where the birch grows. But through an investigation of the iconographies of words we can go much further than this to discover their fullest and, generally speaking, oldest content; for these words and phrases are a key not alone to the material culture but to the vision or thinking of the people who invented them. We must also remember that words themselves are only the images of things and acts, and that it is the latter that are the real bearers of the connotations that the words communicate; so that when we can no longer trace the words "tree of life" in a preliterate culture, but meet in prehistoric art, or "superstanding" in a folk art, only with visual representations, these are fully as valid as the written word would have been, and we can properly translate the visual symbol into "our own words." As Edmund Pottier says, "à l'origine toute représentation graphique répond à une pensée concrète et précise: c'est véritablement une écriture," and we ought never to forget that the history of literature begins long before letters.

Our point is, then, that we are denying in advance all real possibility of an understanding of the "history of literature" if we fail to read back into superstanding words and phrases (that we are disposed to think of as the fancies or inventions of individual poets but are really so much more than "one man deep") their full and original meanings. As I see it, our teaching of literary history is a farce because we do not know what it is "all about" and treat the universal figures of thought as if they were only invented figures of speech; so that if precise English is for the great

²⁶ Most of the references will be found in Coomaraswamy, "The Iconography of Dürer's 'Knots' and Leonardo's 'Concatenation,'" 1944.

majority of our "literate" proletariat a dead language, it may be as much because of as in spite of their "literacy." In the present connection, I say that nothing but a familiarity with the supremely intelligible language of the traditional philosophy, of which the various cultures are the dialects, will make it clear that in such sentences as have been discussed above, the meaning of the copulative "is" will depend entirely on *what* it is that is predicated of the subject: there is one Socrates that ages, and another Self of Socrates that is immortal, one that becomes and another that is. Paraphrasing Sophocles (*Oedipus Tyrannos* 870), "A God in him is great, *he* does not age." "As he is in himself," Socrates is a phenomenon. "As he is in God," he is an essence. Within these two sentences, "is" has different meanings: in the first case that of "becoming," in the second that of "being."