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Course Eng 515

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Terministic Screens

I

Directing the Attention

We might begin by stressing the distinction between a "scientific" and a "dramatic" approach to the nature of language. A "scientific" approach begins with questions of *naming*, or *definition*. Or the power of language to define and describe may be viewed as derivative; and its essential function may be treated as attitudinal or hortatory: attitudinal as with expressions of complaint, fear, gratitude, and such; hortatory as with commands or requests, or, in general, an instrument developed through its use in the social processes of cooperation and competition. I say "developed"; I do *not* say "originating." The ultimate *origins* of language seem to me as mysterious as the origins of the universe itself. One must view it, I feel, simply as the "given." But once an animal comes into being that does happen to have this particular aptitude, the various tribal idioms are unquestionably *developed* by their use as instruments in the tribe's way of living (the practical role of symbolism in what the anthropologist, Malinowski, has called "context of situation"). Such considerations are involved in what I mean by the "dramatic," stressing language as an aspect of "action," that is, as "symbolic action."

The two approaches, the "scientific" and the "dramatic" (language as definition, and language as act) are by no means mutually exclusive. Since both approaches have their proper uses, the distinction is not being introduced invidiously. Definition itself is a symbolic act, just as my proposing of this very distinction is a symbolic act. But though at this moment of beginning, the overlap is considerable, later the two roads diverge considerably, and direct our attention to quite different kinds of observation. The quickest way to indicate the differences of direction might be by this formula: The "scientific" approach builds the edifice of language with primary stress upon a proposition such as "It is, or it is not." The "dramatic" approach puts the primary stress upon such hortatory expressions as "thou shalt, or thou shalt not." And at the other extreme the distinction be-

comes quite obvious, since the scientific approach culminates in the kinds of speculation we associate with symbolic logic, while the dramatic culminates in the kinds of speculation that find their handiest material in stories, plays, poems, the rhetoric of oratory and advertising, mythologies, theologics, and philosophies after the classic model.

The dramatic view of language, in terms of "symbolic action," is exercised about the necessarily *suasive* nature of even the most unemotional scientific nomenclatures. And we shall proceed along those lines; thus:

Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality.

In his seventh *Provincial Letter*, Pascal satirizes a device which the Jesuits of his day called "directing the intention." For instance, to illustrate satirically how one should "direct the intention," he used a burlesque example of this sort: Dueling was forbidden by the Church. Yet it was still a prevalent practice. Pascal satirically demonstrated how, by "directing the intention," one could both take part in a duel and not violate the Church injunctions against it. Thus, instead of intentionally going to take part in a duel, the duelists would merely go for a walk to the place where the duel was to be held. And they would carry guns merely as a precautionary means of self-protection in case they happened to meet an armed enemy. By so "directing the intention," they could have their duel without having transgressed the Church's thou-shalt-not's against dueling. For it was perfectly proper to go for a walk; and in case one encountered an enemy bent on murder, it was perfectly proper to protect oneself by shooting in self-defense.

I bring up this satirically excessive account of directing the *intention*, in the hopes that I can thereby settle for less when discussing the ways in which "terministic screens" direct the *attention*. Here the kind of deflection I have in mind concerns simply the fact that any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others. In one sense, this likelihood is painfully obvious. A textbook on physics, for instance, turns the *attention* in a different direction from a textbook on law or psychology. But some implications of this terministic incentive are not so obvious.

When I speak of "terministic screens," I have particularly in mind some photographs I once saw. They were *different* photographs of the *same* objects, the difference being that they were made with different color filters. Here something so "factual" as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, and even in form, depending upon which color filter was used for the documentary description of the event being recorded.

Similarly, a man has a dream. He reports his dream to a Freudian analyst, or a Jungian, or an Adlerian, or to a practitioner of some other

school. In each case, we might say, the "same" dream will be subjected to a different color filter, with corresponding differences in the nature of the event as perceived, recorded, and interpreted. (It is a commonplace that patients soon learn to have the kind of dreams best suited to the terms favored by their analysts.)

II

Observations Implicit in Terms

We have now moved things one step further along. Not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct the attention to one field rather than to another. Also, *many of the "observations" are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made.* In brief, much that we take as observations about "reality" may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms.

Perhaps the simplest illustration of this point is to be got by contrasting secular and theological terminologies of motives. If you want to operate, like a theologian, with a terminology that includes "God" as its key term, the only sure way to do so is to put in the term, and that's that. The Bible solves the problem by putting "God" into the first sentence—and from this initial move, many implications "necessarily" follow. A naturalistic, Darwinian terminology flatly omits the term, with a corresponding set of implications—and that's that. I have called metaphysics "coy theology" because the metaphysician often introduces the term "God" not outright, as with the Bible, but by beginning with a term that *ambiguously* contains such implications; then he gradually makes these implications explicit. If the term is not introduced thus ambiguously, it can be introduced only by fiat, either outright at the beginning (like the Bible) or as a *non sequitur* (a break in the argument somewhere along the way). In Platonic dialogues, myth sometimes serves this purpose of a leap en route, a step prepared for by the fact that, in the Platonic dialectic, the methodic progress towards *higher levels of generalization* was in itself thought of as progress towards *the divine*.

But such a terministic situation is not by any means confined to matters of theology or metaphysics. As Jeremy Bentham aptly pointed out, all terms for mental states, sociopolitical relationships, and the like are necessarily "fictions," in the sense that we must express such concepts by the use of terms borrowed from the realm of the physical. Thus, what Emerson said in the accents of transcendental enthusiasm, Bentham said in the accents of "tough-mindedness." In Emerson's "tender-minded" scheme, "nature" exists to provide us with terms for the physical realm that are transferable to the moral realm, as the sight of a straight line gives us our word for "right," and of a crooked or twisted line our word for "wrong"; or as we derived our word

for "spirit" from a word for "breath," or as "superciliousness" means literally a raising of the eyebrow. But Bentham would state the same relationship "tough-mindedly" by noting that our words for "right," "wrong," "spirit," etc. are "fictions" carried over from their strictly literal use in the realm of physical sensation. Bentham does not hope that such "fictions" can be avoided. He but asks that we recognize their nature as fictions. So he worked out a technique for helping to disclose the imagery in such ideas, and to discount accordingly. (See C. K. Ogden's book, *Bentham's Theory of Fictions*.)

But though this situation is by no means confined to the terminologies of theology and metaphysics, or even to such sciences as psychology (with terms for the out-going as vs. the in-turning, for dispositions, tendencies, drives, for the workings of the "it" in the Unconscious, and so on), by its very thoroughness theology does have a formula that we can adapt, for purely secular purposes of analysis. I have in mind the injunction, at once pious and methodological, "Believe, that you may understand (*crede, ut intelligas*)." In its theological application, this formula served to define the relation between faith and reason. That is, if one begins with "faith," which must be taken on authority, one can work out a rationale based on this faith. But the faith must "precede" the rationale. (We here impinge upon considerations of logical and temporal priority that were approached from another angle in the previous chapter.)

In my book, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, I have proposed that the word "logology" might be applied in a special way to this issue. By "logology," as so conceived, I would mean the systematic study of theological terms, not from the standpoint of their truth or falsity as statements about the supernatural, but purely for the light they might throw upon the *forms* of language. That is, the tactics involved in the theologian's "words about God" might be studied as "words about words" (by using as a methodological bridge the opening sentence in the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God").

"Logology" would be a purely empirical study of symbolic action. Not being a theologian, I would have no grounds to discuss the truth or falsity of theological doctrines as such. But I do feel entitled to discuss them with regard to their nature merely as language. And it is my claim that the injunction, "Believe, that you may understand," has a fundamental application to the purely secular problem of "terministic screens."

The "logological," or "terministic" counterpart of "Believe" in the formula would be: *Pick some particular nomenclature, some one terministic screen.* And for "That you may understand," the counterpart would be: *"That you may proceed to track down the kinds of observation implicit in the terminology you have chosen, whether your choice of terms was deliberate or spontaneous."*

III Examples

I can best state the case by giving some illustrations. But first let me ask you to reconsider a passage from Chapter One which presents the matter in the most general sense:¹

... can we bring ourselves to realize just how overwhelmingly much of what we mean by "reality" has been built up for us through nothing but our symbol systems? Take away our books, and what little do we know about history, biography, even something so "down to earth" as the relative position of seas and continents? What is our "reality" for today (beyond the paper-thin line of our own particular lives) but all this clutter of symbols about the past, combined with whatever things we know mainly through maps, magazines, newspapers, and the like about the present? In school, as they go from class to class, students turn from one idiom to another. The various courses in the curriculum are in effect but so many different terminologies. And however important to us is the tiny sliver of reality each of us has experienced firsthand, the whole overall "picture" is but a construct of our symbol systems. To meditate on this fact until one sees its full implications is much like peering over the edge of things into an ultimate abyss. And doubtless that's one reason why, though man is typically the symbol-using animal, he clings to a kind of naïve verbal realism that refuses to let him realize the full extent of the role played by symbolicity in his notions of reality.

I hope the passage can serve at least somewhat to suggest how fantastically much of our "Reality" could not exist for us, were it not for our profound and inveterate involvement in symbol systems. Our presence in a room is immediate, but the room's relation to our country as a nation, and beyond that, to international relations and cosmic relations, dissolves into a web of ideas and images that reach through our senses only insofar as the symbol systems that report on them are heard or seen. To mistake this vast tangle of ideas for immediate experience is much more fallacious than to accept a dream as an immediate experience. For a dream really is an immediate experience, but the information that we receive about today's events through-out the world most decidedly is *not*.

But let us consider some examples of terministic screens, in a more specific sense. The child psychologist, John Bowlby, writes a subtle and perceptive paper on "The Nature of the Child's Ties to Its Mother." He observes what he calls "five instinctual responses" of infants, which he lists as: crying, smiling, sucking, clinging, following. Surely no one would deny that

¹ See p. 5.

such responses are there to see. But at the same time, we might recall the observations of the behaviorist, John B. Watson. He, too, found things that were there to see. For instance, by careful scientific study, he discovered sure ways to make babies cry in fright or shriek with rage.

In contrast with Watson's terminology of observation regarding the nature of infantile reflexes, note that Bowlby adopted a much more *social* point of view. His terms were explicitly designed to study infantile responses that involved the mother in a reciprocal relationship to the child.

At the time I read Bowlby's paper, I happened to be doing a monograph on "Verbal Action in St. Augustine's *Confessions*." I was struck by the fact that Augustine's terms for the behavior of infants closely paralleled Bowlby's. Three were definitely the same: crying, smiling, sucking. Although he doesn't mention clinging as a particularly notable term with regard to infancy, as the result of Bowlby's list I noticed, as I might otherwise not have, that he frequently used the corresponding Latin term (*inhaerere*) regarding his attachment to the Lord. "Following" was not explicitly worked out, as an infantile response, though Augustine does refer to God as his leader. And I began wondering what might be done with Spinoza's *Ethics* in this connection, whether his persistent concern with what necessarily "follows" what in Nature could have been in part a metaphysician's transformation of a personal motive strong in childhood. Be that as it may, I was struck by the fact that Augustine made one strategically important addition to Bowlby's list: rest. Once you mention it, you realize that it is very definitely an instinctual response of the sort that Bowlby was concerned with, since it involves a social relation between mother and child. In Augustine's scheme, of course, it also allowed for a transformation from resting as an infant to hopes of ultimately "resting in God."

Our point is: All three terminologies (Watson's, Bowlby's, Augustine's) directed the attention differently, and thus led to a correspondingly different quality of observations. In brief, "behavior" isn't something that you need but observe; even something so "objectively there" as behavior must be observed through one or another kind of *terministic screen*, that directs the attention in keeping with its nature.

Basically, there are two kinds of terms: terms that put things together, and terms that take things apart. Otherwise put, A can feel himself identified with B, or he can think of himself as disassociated from B. Carried into mathematics, some systems stress the principle of continuity, some the principle of discontinuity, or particles. And since all laboratory instruments of measurement and observation are devices invented by the symbol-using animal, they too necessarily give interpretations in terms of either continuity or discontinuity. Hence, physicists forever keep finding that some sub-sub-sub-aspect of nature can be again subdivided; whereupon it's *only* a question of time until they discover that some new cut merges moments previously considered distinct—and so on. Knowing nothing much about physics ex-

cept the terministic fact that any observation of a physicist must necessarily be stated within the resources and embarrassments of man-made terminologies, I would still dare risk the proposition that Socrates' basic point about dialectic will continue to prevail; namely, there is composition, and there is division.

Often this shows up as a distinction between terministic screens positing differences of *degree* and those based on differences of *kind*. For instance, Darwin sees only a difference of degree between man and other animals. But the theologian sees a difference in kind. That is, where Darwin views man as *continuous* with other animals, the theologian would stress the principle of *discontinuity* in this regard. But the theologian's screen also posits a certain kind of *continuity* between man and God that is not ascribed to the relation between God and other animals.

The logological screen finds itself in a peculiar position here. It holds that, even on the purely secular level, Darwin overstated his case. And as a consequence, in his stress upon the principle of *continuity* between man and the other animals, he unduly slighted the evidence for *discontinuity* here. For he assumed that the principle of discontinuity between man and other animals was necessarily identical with a theological view of man.

Such need not be the case at all. Darwin says astonishingly little about man's special aptitudes as a symbol-user. His terministic screen so stressed the principle of continuity here that he could view the principle of discontinuity only as a case of human self-flattery. Yet, logology would point out: We can distinguish man from other animals without necessarily being overhaughty. For what other animals have yellow journalism, corrupt politics, pornography, stock market manipulators, plans for waging thermonuclear, chemical, and bacteriological war? I think we can consider ourselves different in kind from the other animals, without necessarily being overproud of our distinction. We don't need theology, but merely the evidence of our characteristic sociopolitical disorders, to make it apparent that man, the typically symbol-using animal, is alas! something special.

IV

Further Examples

Where are we, then?

We must use terministic screens, since we can't say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another. Within that field there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology. All terminologies must implicitly or explicitly embody choices between the principle of continuity and the principle of discontinuity.

Two other variants of this point about continuity and discontinuity should be mentioned. First, note how it operates in political affairs: During a national election, the situation places great stress upon a *division* between the citizens. But often such divisiveness (or discontinuity) can be healed when the warring factions join in a common cause against an alien enemy (the division elsewhere thus serving to reestablish the principle of continuity at home). It should be apparent how either situation sets up the conditions for its particular kind of scapegoat, as a device that unifies all those who share the same enemy.

For a subtler variant (and here I am somewhat anticipating the specific subject matter of the next chapter) we might cite an observation by D. W. Harding, printed in *Metaphor and Symbol*, a collection of essays by various writers on literary and psychological symbolism. The author concedes that the Freudian terminology is highly serviceable in calling attention to ideas that are not given full conscious recognition because they are *repressed*. But he asks: Why can there not also be ideas that are unclear simply because we have not yet become familiar enough with a situation to take them adequately into account? Thus, when we see an object at a distance, we do not ordinarily "repress" the knowledge of its identity. We don't recognize it simply because we must come closer, or use an instrument, before we can see it clearly enough to know precisely what it is. Would not a terminology that features the unconscious *repression* of ideas automatically deflect our attention from symbols that are not *repressed* but merely *remote*? (At this point, of course, a Jungian terministic screen would ascribe the remoteness of many dream-symbols to their misty survival from an earlier stage in man's development—a terministic device that I have called the "temporizing of essence," since the nature of conditions *now* is stated quasi-narratively in terms of *temporal priority*, a vestigial derivation from "prehistory.")

One more point will end this part of our discussion. Recently I read a paper in which one sociologist accused other sociologists of "oversocializing" their terms for the discussion of human motives. (The article, "The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology," by Dennis H. Wrong, appears in the April 1961 issue of the *American Sociological Review*.)

This controversy brings us to a variant of the terministic situation I discussed in distinguishing between terms for Poetics in particular and terms for Language in General. But the author's thesis really has a much wider application than he claims for it. To the extent that all scientific terminologies, by their very role in specialized disciplines, are designed to focus attention upon one or another particular field of observation, would it not be technically impossible for any such specialized terminology to supply an adequate definition for the discussion of *man in general*? Each might serve to throw light upon one or another aspect of human motives. But the definition of man in general would be formally possible only to a *philosophic*

terminology of motives (insofar as philosophy is the proper field for thoughts on man in general). Any definition of man in terms of specialized scientific nomenclatures would necessarily be "over-socialized," or "over-biologized," or "over-psychologized," or "over-physicized," or "over-poetized," and so on, depending upon which specialized terministic screen was being stretched to cover not just its own special field but a more comprehensive area. Or, if we try to correct the excesses of *one terminology*, by borrowing from several, what strictly *scientific* canon (in the modern sense of scientific specialization) could we adduce as sanction? Would not such an eclectic recipe itself involve a generalized philosophy of some sort?

V

Our Attempt to Avoid Mere Relativism

And now where are we? Must we merely resign ourselves to an endless catalogue of terministic screens, each of which can be valued for the light it throws upon the human animal, yet none of which can be considered central? In one sense, yes. For, strictly speaking, there will be as many different world views in human history as there are people. (*Tot homines, tot sententiae.*) We can safely take it for granted that no one's "personal equations" are quite identical with anyone else's. In the unwritten cosmic constitution that lies behind all man-made Constitutions, it is decreed by the nature of things that each man is "necessarily free" to be his own tyrant, inexorably imposing upon himself the peculiar combination of insights associated with his peculiar combination of experiences.

At the other extreme, each of us shares with all other members of our kind (the often-inhuman human species) the fatal fact that, however the situation came to be, all members of our species conceive of reality somewhat roundabout, through various *media* of symbolism. Any such medium will be, as you prefer, either a way of "dividing" us from the "immediate" (thereby setting up a kind of "alienation" at the very start of our emergence from infancy into that state of articulacy somewhat misleadingly called the "age of reason"); or it can be viewed as a paradoxical way of "uniting" us with things on a "higher level of awareness," or some such. (Here again, we encounter our principles of continuity and discontinuity.)

Whether such proneness to symbolic activity be viewed as a privilege or a calamity (or as something of both), it is a distinguishing characteristic of the human animal in general. Hence it can properly serve as the basis of a general, or philosophic definition of this animal. From this terministic beginning, this intuitive grounding of a position, many observations "necessarily follow." But are we not here "necessarily" caught in our own net? Must we not concede that a screen built on this basis is just one more screen;

and that it can at best be permitted to take its place along with all the others? Can we claim for it special favors?

If I, or any one person, or even one particular philosophic school, had invented it, such doubts would be quite justified. But if we pause to look at it quizzically, I think we shall see that it is grounded in a kind of "collective revelation," from away back. This "collective revelation" involves the pragmatic recognition of a distinction between persons and things. I say "pragmatic" recognition, because often the distinction has not been *formally* recognized. And all the more so because, if an object is closely associated with some person whom we know intimately, it can readily become infused with the identity of that person.

Reverting now to our original term, "dramatistic," I would offer this basic proposition for your consideration: Despite the evidences of primitive animism (that endows many sheer things with "souls") and the opposite modes of contemporary behaviorism (designed to study people as mere things), we do make a pragmatic distinction between the "actions" of "persons" and the sheer "motions" of "things." The slashing of the waves against the beach, or the endless cycle of births and deaths in biologic organisms would be examples of sheer motion. Yet we, the typically symbol-using animal, cannot relate to one another sheerly as things in motion. Even the behaviorist, who studies man in terms of his laboratory experiments, must treat his colleagues as *persons*, rather than purely and simply as automata responding to stimuli.

I should make it clear: I am not pronouncing on the metaphysics of this controversy. Maybe we are but things in motion. I don't have to haggle about that possibility. I need but point out that, whether or not we are just things in motion, we think of one another (and especially of those with whom we are intimate) as *persons*. And the difference between a thing and a person is that the one merely *moves* whereas the other *acts*. For the sake of the argument, I'm even willing to grant that the distinction between *things moving* and *persons acting* is but an illusion. All I would claim is that, illusion or not, the human race cannot possibly get along with itself on the basis of any other intuition. The human animal, as we know it, *emerges into personality* by first mastering whatever tribal speech happens to be its particular symbolic environment.

We could not here list even summarily the main aspects of the Dramatistic screen without launching into a whole new project. For present purposes, I must only say enough to indicate my grounds for contending that a Dramatistic screen does possess the philosophic character adapted to the discussion of man in general, as distinct from the kinds of insight afforded by the application of special scientific terminologies.

In behalf of my claim that the "dramatistic screen" is sanctioned by

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