THEODORE JOUFFROY: PRECURSOR OF ORDINARY LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY

It is my aim in this paper to show how Théodore Jouffroy, an early nineteenth-century French philosopher, plainly shows evidence of having adopted an outlook toward the relationship between language and truth which was to become perhaps the most fundamental assumption of recent ordinary language philosophy. The outlook in question holds that there is something definitive about ordinary language--that it provides the ultimate criterion of truth. Where and when a philosophical thesis fails to conform to the dictates of ordinary language it is regarded as somehow "bewitched;" philosophical problems arise, in Wittgenstein's famous dictum, when language "goes on holiday."

From this perspective, the role the philosopher assumes becomes something of a cross between judge and exorcist. As judge, he evaluates the adequacy of particular philosophical positions by measuring them against the law provided by ordinary language. If, for example, a philosopher should claim (as many have) that we do not perceive material objects directly, but instead perceive ideas from which we infer that such objects exist (or out of which we "construct" them), the ordinary language philosopher would examine how the concept of "perceiving directly" is employed in everyday discourse, and, finding no precedent there for the philosophical use of the term, would rule the latter to be "out of order"---in violation of the statutes of ordinary language. As exorcist, to overcome the bewitchment of language, such philosophers seek not to solve philosophical problems, but to dissolve them---to cast them out, so to speak, thereby purifying our language of these malevolent aberrations. In short, then, a philosophical position is seen as adequate to the extent that its key terms harmonize with ordinary discourse, and inadequate to the extent that it violates ordinary linguistic conventions.

I will argue here that Jouffroy can be counted as a legitimate forerunner to this philosophical approach by citing numerous instances throughout his works in which it is plain that he is offering, as decisive evidence in favor of or against a particular view, whether it conforms or fails to conform to the way we conventionally speak in relevant situations.

First, however, since his name is hardly a household word in philosophical circles, I will give a brief characterization of his careeer as a philosopher. And in conjunction with this I will indicate the principal sources of his thinking, giving special attention to where he came by his views toward the primacy of ordinary language.

Born and raised in the Jura mountains, Jouffroy arrived in Paris in 1815 to study philosophy and found himself under the direction---or the spell--of the young Victor Cousin. Only four years Jouffroy's elder, Cousin had just then been placed in charge of the philosophical instruction at the *Ecole normale* by Pierre Paul Royer-Collard, who had removed himself from the classroom to tend to administrative duties. Jouffroy turned out to be Cousin's most important protege, and they remained close for many years thereafter. He assumed teaching duties of his own (much too soon, by his own admission),[1] which, like Cousin's, were suspended in 1820 when the political situation tightened somewhat. In the years subsequent to this, Jouffroy carried on his instruction privately in his own apartment on rue du Four, before a select group of auditors which included such noteworthy intellectual figures as Sainte-Beuve, Vitet, Damiron, and Dubois. It was not until the (brief) period of liberalization which came in 1828 that he and Cousin were allowed to return to their normal professorial duties.

Jouffroy's health was always rather delicate--the fetid Parisian atmosphere apparently did not sit well in lungs that had only breathed pure mountain air--and he showed early signs of consumption. Ultimately he succombed to this disease in 1842, barely 46 years of age. As a result, his written philosophical output is spotty and fragmentary--many projects were begun but few were completed; lecture notes were drawn up but rarely edited by Jouffroy himself into a publishable state. His *Cours* d'esthétique, for example, could easily have been one of the most significant works in aesthetics in the nineteenth century, had he but taken the trouble to organize and polish it. Unfortunately, all that has been passed on to us of it is an edition comprised of students' notes published posthumously by his close friend Philibert Damiron. Even at that, however, it remains a highly insightful work. His other published works

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[1] Jouffroy gives a brief characterization of his "predicament" in being charged with duties both at the Ecole Normale and the College Bourbon in his *Nouveaux mélanges philosophiques*, pp. 95-96.

include two collections of *Mélanges philosophiques*, and a *Cours de droit naturel* which itself is but the first part of what was to have been a much larger project.

When he began his studies, his mentor Cousin was heavily under the influence of the philosophy of the eighteenth-century Scottish thinker Thomas Reid, which had been introduced into France and passed on directly to Cousin by Royer-Collard. Reid's philosophy, known as commonsense realism (a misleading term, since "commonsense" tends to disguise the actual rigor and profundity of Reid's thinking) was provoked, as was Kant's transcendental idealism, by the scepticism of David Hume. It aimed to establish that it is perfectly proper to assert that we are in direct contact with external reality, and leaned heavily on introspective psychological analyses in arguing this position. No one, then or since, ever assimilated Reid's philosophical outlook as thoroughly as Jouffroy did. It was he, in fact, who supplied the definitive French translation of Reid's complete works (one of the few projects, in fact, which Jouffroy succeeded in finishing, though it took him a decade to do so). In effect, then, Jouffroy became the leading exponent in France of Reid's commonsense philosophy.

Reid had also become an influential figure in American philosophy at the same time, and many of our universities were headed by devotees of the Scottish commonsense school: Francis Wayland at Brown, Henry Tappan at Michigan, Asa Mahan at Oberlin, and James McCosh at Princeton (even James Patterson at my own University of Kentucky), to name a few. Consequently, certain of Jouffroy's works found English translators and, one presumes, supplemented the already solid tradition. In particular, an edition entitled *Philosophical Miscellanies* appeared in 1838, and his *Introduction to Ethics* (the *Cours du Droit Naturel*) came out in 1848.

Actually Reid himself is sometimes credited (or blamed) for having anticipated the ordinary language approach to the resolution (or dissolution) of philosophical problems, for he continually uses the discourse of the "vulgar" as a touchstone in supporting his own positions and criticizing others. It is erroneous to make this attribution, however, and in the present context it is important to explain why.

For Reid what is basic are the first principles of commonsense---certain necessary truths which govern our experience of the world and

which are too fundamental either to be disproven rationally or even supported rationally, since they lie at the base of all human reason and cognition. One such principle, for example, is the causal law: "That whatever begins to exist must have a cause which produces it." (Vol. I, 455). One cannot deduce this principle from any others, Reid believed, simply because we cannot antecedently form any notion of experience which would be independent of causality. The best we could do would be to proceed *ad absurdum*, entertaining the mere supposition of the negation of the causal law, then finding ourselves at once precipitated into a thicket of absurdities. He discerned many other such principles, as well; some logical, some mathematical, some moral, and various others which pertain to the domain of human cognition.

Now ordinary language, Reid found, is helpful when it illuminates certain of these basic truths--which it often does, since were it not for our adherence to them we would probably not be able to navigate safely among all the perils life places in our way, and ordinary discourse is normally of a very "practical" sort. If our language---to continue with the above example---did not contain a rich stock of causal locutions, the simplest warnings, such as "Bridge Freezes Before Roadway," might be unformulable or unfathomable. It is also the case, however, that ordinary language is often lacking in the very sort of analytic precision that the philosopher seeks. Where this shortcoming occurs, there is no impropriety in the philosopher's stepping in to clarify, precise, and analyze more deeply. In effect, then, for Reid ordinary language often provides good advice, often invaluable advice, but it is never regarded by him as providing the last word in any philosophical dispute simply by virtue of its being ordinary language. It functions as a guide, but even the best of guides sometimes goes astray in the densest thicket.

Jouffroy was attentive to Reid's frequent appeals to common discourse, and seems to have taken them more seriously than Reid himself had intended. (Or perhaps Jouffroy simply saw something which Reid didn't). In any case, it is common in Jouffroy's writings to find him treating ordinary language in the normative sense akin to the more recent approach. Let us look at some instances of this tendency.

In his *Cours de droit naturel* Jouffroy frequently dismisses one ethical view or another on the grounds that it abuses the ordinary understanding of terms. Hobbes, for example, is criticized for using the

concepts of right and duty in absurd ways.[2] Hobbes claimed that there are natural rights in the state of nature, and that these natural rights only give way to civil rights after the formation of a social polity. The natural right which one possesses in a state of nature is the right to collect to himself all that he can, but this, Jouffroy argues, is a bizarre conception of "right." Normally a right imposes a corresponding duty: if one person has a right to free speech, other people have a duty not to impede this right, and to disregard such a right is to be false to a duty. To have a right implies that no one else has a right to violate it, and a right possessed by all must be acknowledged by all. But if all individuals have a right to all things, as Hobbes claims, then no one has any duty to honor the rights of others; on the contrary, everyone has a right to violate the rights of others. And paradoxically, this right to possess all things, though supposedly possessed by all, can in fact be acknowledged by no one.

What is the justification for violating the ordinary meanings of words in this way? None. "Hobbes may use the words right and duty... but if he employs them in their general acceptation, he falls into a monstrous and glaring contradiction. If, on the other hand, and as apparently is the case, he attaches to them a new and unwonted sense, we may well inquire by what title and authority does he alter thus the common meaning of words, and deceive his reader into the idea that rights and duties are, or can be, recognized in such a system as his? For one or the other of these abuses of language, Hobbes must seem liable to condemnation, in the judgment of every reasonable man." (Jouffroy, *Introduction to Ethics*, Vol. 1, 313). Moreover, in almost every case, to say as Hobbes did, that we yield to the strongest motive is to say what has no meaning since in most cases it is impossible to determine the strongest motive; and, more important, motives of reason, duty, passion, and appetite are in principle incommensurable. And so the very concept of a motive has also been illegitimately tampered with.

Jouffroy found many additional cases of semantical misadventure. The philosophical system of Hume arose from a different "confusion of language," for Hume gave an unusual sense to 'cause' and then confusedly drew conclusions that follow from the ordinary sense of the word rather than his own. (*Introduction to Ethics*, Vol. 1, 90). Adam Smith likewise is faulted for having constantly reached conclusions that

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[2] Jouffroy's discussion of Hobbes occurs in chapters 11 $ 12 of vol. I, pp. 274-316.

depended upon linguistic confusions. We are compelled to understand Smith's expression "impartiality of the spectator" as applying solely to sympathy. However, Jouffroy asserts, it is "difficult to comprehend what is meant by the impartiality of sympathy, because, in the common acceptation of words, it is the absence of sympathy that constitutes impartiality." (Vol. 2, 131-132). Smith's system indeed may employ, in a certain sense, the words which represent moral ideas; "but it can do so only by altering the meaning which they have in common acceptation." (Vol. 2, 167).

The previous examples show how Jouffroy leans on ordinary language to refute certain philosophical claims. There are many instances where he calls upon ordinary discourse to substantiate the position he is endorsing. In his aesthetics, for example, he sets up the very divisions which are to dominate his entire theory by appealing to ordinary language, asserting, "if one is to believe languages, the beautiful is not (equivalent to) the agreable or the pretty; the pretty is not the sublime, and from these distinctions follow a series of new problems." (*Cours d'esthétique*, 6). His analysis of beauty itself remains forever in touch with "those things which we *call*[3] beautiful" (80). And quite interestingly, on one point at which Reid himself found it necessary to deviate from what he took to be the dictates of ordinary language in order to make a philosophical distinction, Jouffroy finds that very distinction itself to be a feature of ordinary discourse, and thus uses this as a point of justification for the distinction.

To explore this issue a bit further, Reid claimed that true beauty was not really a property of the surface of any object, but instead lay behind the object, in its spiritual interior. He therefore distinguished between derived beauty--the beauty of surfaces--and original beauty--the inner spiritual beauty, a distinction which does not exist in ordinary language. Jouffroy, however, finds confirmation in our ordinary linguistic dispositions of the very distinction which Reid drew. He proceeds through the concept of the ugly, which stands semantically opposed to the beautiful, and shows how we are willing to call something, for example, a good imitation, but ugly: a portrait of Ingrid Bergman (my example, obviously) that ended up looking like Humprey Bogart would not be an ugly likeness of Ingrid Bergman; it would just be no likeness at all.

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[3] Emphasis mine.

Likewise, "the language says: this portrait resembles, but it is ugly. Proof that in ordinary language (la langue vulgaire)... common sense takes the word beautiful in a more restricted sense... (one which) applies evidently to the invisible" (243). The invisible is Jouffroy's term for what Reid called the spiritual interior of a thing.

Concerning the very act of expression itself (which is a central component in both Reid's and his own aesthetics), Jouffroy argues that we might be pleased by the expressiveness of a certain spectacle--the sight of a person lost to drunkenness, or just the face of an ape--an yet find the spectacle to be ugly. However, he asks, "this quality of expressiveness--should it receive the name beauty...?" And he judges "this would not be in conformity with ordinary language. No one gives the name beautiful or ugly to that power which objects have to be expressive. The only thing to which we apply these words is the moral reality, (which is) invisible, expressed by material forms" (237). Here again, then, through observing how we speak in characterizing ugliness, we are led to realize a fundamental truth about the nature of beauty--a truth, again, which Reid himself took to be obscured by ordinary language.

To give one final example of Jouffroy's positive use of ordinary discourse, he appeals to it in the following way in laying the foundation for the distinction between natural science and (introspective) psychology. He writes "I do not know myself as I know external things. In my knowledge of the latter there are two different elements: the object known, which is other than myself, and the knowing subject, which is identical with myself. But in self-knowledge these two elements merge: the knower is identital with the known... From this we can see that there are two quite different manners of knowing, which no languages have ever confounded. Of external objects [we say] I see them, I perceive them; [but] I am conscious of myself, aware of my own states. . ." (*Nouveaux mélanges philosophiques*, 239)[4] Distinctions drawn in everyday manners of speaking thus confirm, in Jouffroy's estimate, the larger systematic distinction for which he is arguing.

I hope this sampling of examples from various works of Jouffroy is sufficient to indicate the different attitudes toward ordinary language held by Jouffroy and his philosophical patriarch Thomas Reid. And I

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[4] Emphasis of clause my own. Individual words emphasized in text.

hope it likewise demonstrates that of the two, Jouffroy's attitude comes much closer to capturing the spirit of recent ordinary language philosophy. To Jouffroy, it seems, conformity to ordinary language can function actively not just in suggesting what the true philosphical position is, but in actually proving it. And disconformity to the dictates of ordinary language constitutes for him a sufficient reason for dismissing an erroneous belief.

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