

## June 14

I got a bit carried away yesterday evening in discussing *existence* - all I meant to do was give a general idea on some of the contents of the thesis. As I have already mentioned, I did not mean to concentrate on ethics - I first wanted to lay some solid **epistemic** foundations: To fully **understand** what it **means** to **understand**.<sup>9</sup> This led me to the philosophy of language, and analytic philosophy in particular. I found that some of the most prominent contemporary philosophers openly admitted their (our!) ignorance as to the meaning of commonly used terms such as *understanding*, *meaning* and *truth*.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Meaning* and *understanding* are mysteriously interconnected - there is no consensus as to the correlation between these two terms. *Meaning* is considered a key-term in the philosophy of language - in **semantics**, while *understanding* belongs to **epistemology**. But in ordinary language, they are practically inseparable: What **is** understood, is the **meaning** of a sentence (or an utterance), and what **has** no meaning cannot be understood. The prevailing paradigm in the (western) philosophy of language takes **meaning** as something that is **objective**: The meaning of a term in a language is “attached” to the term in the same way for all speakers of this language. This objectivist notion of *meaning* could be summarized as follows: A term of a language must **have** a meaning. If it doesn't, it does not belong to the language. If the term is properly constructed, then the term “exists” in the language. There is one, objective meaning associated with every term in the language. The **meaning** of “*meaning*” is still vague,<sup>14</sup> but it is taken as **objective**: shared by all (competent) speakers. *Understanding*, on the other hand, is something a speaker **does**: It is a **verb**: to understand. Therefore, its **objectivity** is much more questionable. On one hand, *understanding* is a **feeling**: A mental “click”. The passage from a state of not understanding to a state of understanding may occur independently of the event of hearing or reading the term that is understood; It may occur at a later time, with no external prompting. The objectivist notion of *meaning* contends, however, that the term **is** actually *understood* if and only if this *understanding* resulted in grasping **the** one and only (objective) *meaning* of the term. But if *understanding* is a **mental act**, the act of **grasping** the *meaning*, then it must involve an **epistemic change** in the speaker who had understood. This epistemic change can in no way be **objective**, because different speakers (even competent ones) have different conceptual schemes, and the **changes** occurring in them are therefore particular to the specific scheme. When a blind person claims to have understood the sentence “*The cat is on the mat*”, the epistemic change he has undergone by hearing and understanding this sentence cannot be identical to the epistemic change in the conceptual scheme of a seeing speaker.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the objectivist notion of meaning takes these two clearly different instances of *understanding* to result in a single, **shared** meaning they now both possess. My point is this: *Meaning* cannot be **objective** if *understanding* is **subjective**. *Meaning* and *understanding* go hand in hand: Either they are both objective, (and than *understanding* needs to be explained as a process that is identical for all speakers for every given lingual term), or they are both **subjective**, (which is how I understand Quine's *meaning holism*), in which case the concept of **language** must be redescribed.

<sup>10</sup> One of the best examples of self-proclaimed ignorance regarding the solution of this problem is provided by **Stephen Schiffer**, in his 1987 *Remnants of Meaning*.<sup>16</sup> After having made what was considered significant contributions to semantic theory and the philosophy of language in general, (Schiffer's *Meaning*<sup>17</sup> is a standard text in basic courses in the philosophy of language), Schiffer has the intellectual courage to admit in the last page of his last book: “*I simply do not know what could count as a philosophical theory of meaning and intentionality.*” I first encountered Stephen Schiffer in a Hebrew translation of his paper *Meaning and Thought*<sup>18</sup>. It was he who has first drawn my attention to the astonishing fact that objective meaning is either meaningless or self refuting. This excellent article describes, in twenty pages, the logical course of Schiffer's conversion, from a physicalist, Gricean<sup>19</sup> pragmatics theoretician to a Quinean *radical translator*<sup>20</sup>.

**Truth** is a quite mysterious term: Not only do we all understand it; Our understanding of it is clearly a condition for qualifying as a **speaker** of a language. Still, the argument is still open<sup>11</sup> on the right (true?) definition of **truth**. Truth is traditionally considered the subject matter of **epistemology** - the science of human thought and understanding. Simultaneously, it is also the subject matter of another science: of (formal) **logic**. Here I found myself in a territory that seemed familiar, due to my technical computer-oriented education. But I quickly realized I didn't know the first thing about what **really** counts: the **philosophy** of logic. I was urged by my teachers to take more logic, and discovered that logical theory, like any other science, requires **presuppositions**: ground rules, basic terms, axioms, that were considered **given**: They defined the terms and provided (or explained) the motivation of the theory: Its **goals**. I quickly understood that even if I concentrate on logic, I will not escape the ethical. Who is to provide me with the **right**, or correct, presuppositions of logical theory?

The sign of *De Fortuna* says the house was built in 1654. While slowly strolling in the colorful hand-paved alleys of *Edam*, I reflected on the unbelievable fact, that my room has been there for three and a half centuries. When this house was erected, Spinoza was 22 years old, and already an intellectual giant and a free thinker. Two years later, in 1656, the Jewish community of Amsterdam excommunicated him for blasphemy. How frustrating must it have been, to be so misunderstood! Spinoza was a poor translator. He had wonderful thoughts, which became, when articulated in Latin, so offensive.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Quine's notion of truth is *deflationary*, or *disquotational*: It has no **explanatory value**: There is no significant difference between "**P**" and **P is true**. "Truth", according to Quine, is an inessential feature of natural language.<sup>21</sup> Every language (may) have its own, internal notion of truth. Quine separates the notion of truth from that of **reference**. On the connection between language and what it is **about** - the reference - Quine takes the **whole** language to refer to the **whole** reference (also known as "world") *as a corporate body*.<sup>22</sup> The truth of a particular sentence in that language does **not** depend upon a referential relation between it and a portion of the external world. This position defies the atomistic view of Quine's teacher, Rudolph Carnap.<sup>23</sup> Carnap held a different notion of truth. For him, truth was closely linked with **correspondence**. A sentence in a language is true if it **correctly** represents the state of affairs. Quine's criticism of this position may be summarized into one question: How can a sentence "**incorrectly** represent" the state of affairs? Carnap believed that a sentence either **represented** (referred) or it **didn't**. He didn't distinguish "correct" representations from "incorrect" ones. The third prevailing view on **truth** concentrates specifically on this "correctness": Pragmatists such as Dewey<sup>24</sup> and Pierce<sup>25</sup> claimed that it is just this correctness that establishes truth: A sentence is true if it *pays its way*,<sup>26</sup> if it **works**, if the sentence's truth is **desirable**, or **good**. This view, advocated in recent years by Richard Rorty, revives the Platonic inseparability of truth from **morals**.

<sup>12</sup> It is uncertain, whether Spinoza wrote in Dutch and then had it translated into Latin. He probably wrote *Ethics* in Latin,<sup>27</sup> in which he was less than fluent. In Spinoza's reply to Belinberg<sup>28</sup> he complains over linguistic difficulties. He wishes he could write in the language he was educated in (**Hebrew**, or possibly Spanish), so he would express his ideas more intelligibly. Spinoza is aware of the limitations of his language, what may be perceived as an aching lack of eloquence. Spinoza's worldview is strikingly similar to that of **Parmenides**<sup>29</sup>. This great pre-Socratic philosopher claimed to have been divinely enlightened, and chose to advertise the content of this personal enlightenment in poetry, rather than the simple prose of his Milethean and Eleathean contemporaries. Parmenides is considered enigmatic, but was clearly a metaphysical **monist**, like Spinoza. The resemblance between them is explicit in his "*The Way of Truth*": "*There still remains just one account of a way, that it is. On this way there are very many signs, that being uncreated and imperishable it is, whole and of a single kind and unshaken and perfect. It never was nor*

So, my present task is really just one of translation, or articulation. The question of “knowing **the** truth” is independent from the question of “successfully communicating one’s thoughts”. The former does not guarantee the latter. In fact, Parmenides, Socrates and Spinoza are not the only philosophers who communicated poorly. So was the case with Leibniz, Hegel and Heidegger, and **is** the case with Dummett and Derrida. Philosophers, being so obsessed with **the** truth, sacrificed the **clarity** of their texts. The great Kant himself admits, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*<sup>13</sup>, to have sacrificed clarity for precision. I believe, that from a **moral** point of view, Philosophy should be clear and intelligible. Intelligibility does not rule out profoundness. Superficial and incoherent ideas may be as unintelligible as any. An unintelligible presentation may only prevent the public from finding out that nothing significant is being said. This explains the flourishing of **analytic philosophy** throughout the 20th century. For the first time, **clarity** of the text became a **value**.<sup>14</sup> A philosopher needs to be **understood** by his audience, otherwise he is not making good philosophy. This, again, supports my decision to write two texts, in two languages, alongside each other. The alternative would have been to sacrifice one of the two audiences of this book.

Many philosophers I have read over the last two years gave me a clear impression that they have discovered very important information about the **world**, and/or about **life** (and its **meaning**) and/or about **God**. They were all extremely intelligent and learned human beings, some with admirable biographies. Still, they did not agree with each other. I was amazed to discover to what extent they were **different** - (seemed to have) said different things. The task I set to myself, to form my own philosophical worldview, first seemed as

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*will be, since it is now, all together, one, continuous. For what birth will you seek for it? How and Whence did it grow? I shall not allow you to say nor to think from not being: for it is not to be said nor thought that it is not...*”<sup>30</sup>. Spinoza’s monism incorporates an inevitable dichotomy between the attribute of **thought** and that of **extension**, and so does Parmenides’: His dichotomy is between “The way of truth”, corresponding to Spinoza’s **thought**, and “The way of seeming”, which corresponds to Spinoza’s (physical) **extension**. Where Parmenides parts from Spinoza, is in restricting the notion of **truth** to the **first** way, the domain of **reason**. This dichotomy, shared by both, is (in modern philosophical jargon) the distinction between **epistemology** and **ontology**. What is striking, is that **before** the dawn of recorded human thought, truth was already identified as an **epistemic** rather than ontological notion. For Parmenides, ontology (in the sense of **existence** of sensory perceivable objects) is **illusory**. He has been described as “the father of **idealism**” in that the reality of the “way of the truth” can be understood as a non-material reality. But for monists such as Parmenides and Spinoza, the distinction between idealism and materialism is insignificant anyway.

<sup>13</sup> In the introduction to the first critique<sup>31</sup> Kant confesses to have written an extremely difficult book to understand. He considers this inevitable, as a more “popular” (intelligible?) writing would result in a much lengthier text.

<sup>14</sup> Hylton<sup>32</sup> considers **clarity** a basic characteristic of analytic philosophy. It is not just a question of the **style** of writing philosophy; it is elevated to the level of a requirement, bearing a moral directive: Be nice to your readers. Make it **easy** for them to understand you. This broad characterization is what keeps writers such as **Rorty**<sup>33</sup> and **Putnam**<sup>34</sup> within the domain of analytic philosophy. By denying the objectivity of **reference**, both have renounced the objectivist paradigm that characterizes analytic philosophy. If they still “deserve” to be called “analytic philosophers”, it is due to their clear language and intelligible style.

a problem of multiple choice: Shop around, pick the philosopher that you believe is **right**, and learn everything he has to say about the things you find interesting. I soon discovered that I agree **both** with Spinoza **and** Leibniz<sup>15</sup>, both with Berkeley and Locke, Plato and Aristotle. I discovered that they were not **really** in disagreement; they were simply discussing **different things**. Gradually I realized, that forming a personal philosophical worldview was not a question of picking **one** out of the variety of systems offered by the philosophical canon. Rather, it was a question of **reconciliation**: The worldview that I would form (as my own) must “explain away” the differences between all great philosophers: It must show, **how they were all right!** In a sense, this was Hegel’s<sup>16</sup> greatest achievement: He accepted **all** the philosophies that preceded his own as **true**, and by doing this, **reinforcing** the coherence and credibility of his **own** philosophy, which embraced all its predecessors under its wings.<sup>17</sup>

**If** I am to arrive at my own, personal philosophical *worldview*, it must be able to do exactly that: To show why, or **how**, all philosophers were exactly **right** in what they were saying. This worldview must be capable of producing, for every great thinker that ever lived, a certain **context** in which he should be understood, and **explained** to have been **right**. This requirement (from my *worldview* to-be) was not limited to metaphysicians, or even to philosophers in general. It pertained also to the three most influential systems in the history of the western world: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Having been brought up in a traditional (although non-orthodox) Jewish environment, I always had a strong belief in the transcendent existence (!) of a morally **good** super-being, which I conveniently thought of as “God”. In a way, it was this God, alongside several other age-old metaphysical open questions, that led me to the realm of philosophy. Most other confused 40 year-olds seek the truth with Jesus, Buddha or the holy bible; I went to the Tel-Aviv University.

Holland is a wonderful example of human coexistence. It (alongside several other west-European countries) is the closest thing to *Utopia* that mankind has reached since it was disgracefully thrown out of *Eden*. Centuries of peace (excluding two unfortunate

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<sup>15</sup> Leibniz<sup>35</sup> and Spinoza are considered two opposing versions of 17th century **rationalism**. They are both considered extremely **coherent**, yet in deep, fundamental metaphysical disagreement as to the proper (“real”?) worldview. Spinoza took the road of **oneness**: There **is** only **one**, whole **thing**: the *substansia*, also known as *God*, or *Nature*. Leibniz, on the other hand, took the opposite direction to extreme **pluralism**: There **are** only isolated, independent and impenetrable *monads*, primordially synchronized.

<sup>16</sup> Hegel’s<sup>36</sup> dialectical philosophy claimed to have **settled** all preceding (and seemingly contradictory) philosophies. His notion of **synthesizing** a **thesis** with its **antithesis** not only explained the **possibility** of (**true**) contradictions, (in this context, of different contradictory philosophies, all **true** at the same time), but is **supported** by this fact. The multitude of (seemingly) inconsistent philosophies counts as **evidence** for the validity of Hegel’s system.

<sup>17</sup> Another more recent writer who offers an explanation for all preceding philosophies, is *Jacques Derrida*.<sup>37</sup> His *Langue*, the monstrous “arch-language” on which we speakers and our corresponding little worlds (or conceptual schemes) float, propelled by the power of *Differance*, encompasses all philosophies: past, present and future.

episodes in the 20th century that didn't really concern the peaceful Dutch) molded a harmonious society, that is both as modern as any place (On the 500 year old church tower in the center of town, I spotted satellite antennae), while still preserving nature, modesty, humor and friendliness. I was walking the streets of Edam this morning with my wife, Esti, who joined me for the first three days to make sure I'm comfortably settled. She pointed out the fact that all street-level apartments had large glass windows facing the street, like a shop-window. Through those large windows, the interiors of the apartments were practically on display for the people walking on the sidewalks. These interiors were amazingly tidy, like little museums. It is no wonder this was pointed out by her, since she is known for her insistence on **privacy**. We have many times discussed the question whether her inclination for privacy was a normal human feature, or a weakness, a product of life-long conditioning. She said: "Can you imagine, living on display like that?" I sensed an opportunity to drag her into a quick philosophical discourse, and answered: "Why not? They probably have nothing to hide!" Esti was perfectly aware of the implied criticism, and patiently replied: "You must admit that my obsession with privacy had faded lately." To this I had to agree. But this short exchange sent me thinking of the question that was still open: Is privacy a value? When we returned to the room, I opened the Bible that was lying beside my bed, and read about the **discovery** of privacy: "...and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked;".<sup>18</sup> The second display of privacy comes two verses later: "and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord...". The need for privacy, the awareness of having private parts, of secrets and hiding, emerged immediately after the sin was committed. Could (the need for) privacy be the necessary consequence of sinning?

On the central wooden ceiling beam of the dining room of *De Fortuna*, a Dutch sentence is inscribed in heavy gothic letters: "*Dan het Concert des Levens, krijgt niemand een program*". although my Dutch is a perfect example of something **inexistent**, I believe to have understood its meaning: "In the concert of life, no one receives a program". I am not a competent speaker of Dutch; I'm not even an **incompetent** speaker of it. I am nevertheless absolutely sure I understood this Dutch sentence. I happen to deeply disagree

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<sup>18</sup> The story of *Eden* is a fertile source of philosophical contemplation, even in non-theological contexts. I believe it is even relevant to issues in the philosophy of language. It was Eli Allon who drew my attention to Umberto Eco's 1971 article "*On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language*"<sup>38</sup>. Eco's motivation in this article is primarily aesthetical, but it is an excellent exercise in semantics. He devises a thought experiment, taking place in the Garden of *Eden*. Adam and Eve have a simple, basic *Edenic* language with a limited vocabulary which enables no contradictions to be phrased. When the pair discovered that God's command can be violated, the first **contradiction** was introduced into their hitherto innocent language: A **command**, even from the highest authority, is a self-contradicting term: It is something that **must** be obeyed, and still it is something that **may** be disobeyed. What a shocking revelation must it have been! The exposure to the first contradiction in history had a strange effect on the first two **speakers**: They hurried and **got dressed**. The clothes mankind has been wearing ever since symbolize the human contradictory state: They mark the contradiction by acting as the barrier, the **separator** between what is "**I**" and what is **not**.

with what I understood in this inscription.<sup>19</sup> The problem with (the concert of) **life** is not that there is no instruction manual; on the contrary: There are **too many**. Every holy script was designed as exactly that: As a guide to proper living. The same holds for the writings of most philosophers throughout history. In the multitude of trees, one does not see the forest. So I come up with a somewhat revised meaning of the inscription: “In the concert of life, there is no **official** (objective) program. There are many, and every one is free to write her own”.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> We take it for granted that a speaker may understand an utterance of another speaker, and still deny the truth of the uttered proposition. I shall later strongly argue **against** this contention. But for the time being, I still employ a loose, “fuzzy” understanding of the verb *to understand*. When I claim to have understood a sentence P uttered by a fellow speaker S, I don’t claim to have captured **the** objective meaning of P. It is not yet established (as far as I am concerned) whether *meaning* is something that **can**, in principle, be objective (shared by all speakers). By claiming to have **understood** I just declare the fact that **I** have attached **a meaning** to P. I could later discover (possibly with help from S) that the meaning I attached to P does not cohere with the meaning I (similarly) attached to another sentence, Q, also uttered by S. In such a case, I will find myself compelled to revise the meaning of either P or Q (assuming I care to make sense of S’s utterances). But if, for instance, S happens to be dead (as is the case with the author of the Dutch inscription), it is up to me alone to decide on the meaning of P. If P and Q are two distinct sentences uttered (or written) by a speaker who utters no more, the only criterion for proper understanding of P and Q are their being **consistent** with each other: If they are **not**, I cannot say I have understood either of them correctly. But if they do not contradict each other, I consider them properly understood.

<sup>20</sup> We cannot **really** understand and **disagree** at the same time. Consider the following example: My little daughter Keren says to me: “There is a witch in my closet”. I open the closet, and there is no witch. Keren says: “She left. But when you close the door, she will return”. I am tempted to say to her: “I understand what you mean by saying there is a witch in your closet, but I disagree; you are **wrong**: There is no witch in your closet”. But before I do, I wonder: Do I **really** understand what **she** means by her claim? Is it possible for me to grasp **her** understanding of this witch, who can hop in and out of young girl’s closets? **My** understanding of “witch” must be significantly different from Keren’s. Therefore, the way **I** understand the sentence “There is a witch in my closet” must be significantly different from her’s. The fact that **I disagree** with the (meaning of the) sentence as **I** understood it, is the **evidence** for my **not** having understood!