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1

The Skilful Heretic

In 1986 Oxford University Press published a volume of essays drawing on the work of the philosopher Paul Grice, who was then 73. It was not formally described as a Festschrift, but Grice's name was concealed as an acronym of the title, *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality: Intentions, Categories, Ends*, and many of those who contributed to the volume took the opportunity of paying tribute to his work and influence. Among these, Gordon Baker revealed that what he admired most was Grice's 'skilful advocacy of heresies'.¹ In a similar vein, Grice's colleague Richard Grandy once introduced him to an audience with the comment that he could always be relied on to rally to 'the defence of the underdogma'.² Given Grice's conventional academic career together with his current status in philosophy and, particularly, in linguistics, these accolades may seem surprising. His entire working life was spent in the prestigious universities of Oxford and Berkeley, making him very much an establishment figure. Much of his philosophy of language, particularly his theory of conversational implicature, has for a number of decades played a central role in debates about the relationship between semantics and pragmatics, or meaning as a formal linguistic property and meaning as a process taking place in contexts and involving speakers and hearers. But the canonical status of Grice's ideas masks their unconventional and even controversial beginnings. As Baker himself observes, Grice's heresies have tended to be transformed by success into orthodoxies.

In fact, Grice's work was often characterised by the challenges it posed to accepted wisdom, and by the novel approaches it proposed to established philosophical issues. The theory of conversational implicature is a good example. It is often summarised as one of the earliest and most successful attempts to explain the fact, familiar to common sense, that

what people literally say and what they actually mean can often be quite different matters. In particular, the theory is concerned with some apparent discrepancies between classical logic and natural language. More generally, it addresses the question of whether the meaning of everyday language is best explained in terms of formal linguistic rules, or in terms of the vagaries and variables of human communication. Grice's theory developed against the background of a sharp distinction of approaches to these issues. Philosophers such as Bertrand Russell, who saw logic as the appropriate apparatus for explaining meaning, dismissed the differences displayed by natural language as examples of its inherent imperfection. Everyday language was just too messy and imprecise to form an appropriate topic for philosophical inquiry. The opposing view is perhaps best summed up by the slogan from Wittgenstein's later work that 'meaning is use'.³ Philosophers from this school of thought argued that if natural language diverges from logical meaning, this is simply because logic is not the appropriate philosophical tool for explaining language. Meaning in language is an important area of study in its own right, but can be considered only in connection with the variety of ways in which language is used by speakers.

Grice's approach to this debate was to argue that both views were wrong-headed. He proposed to think outside the standard disjunction of positions. Logic cannot give an adequate account of natural language, but nor is language simply a multifarious collection of uses, unamenable to logical analysis. Rather, logic can explain much, but not all, of the meaning of certain natural language expressions. More generally, formal semantic rules play a vital part in explaining meaning in everyday language, but they do not do the whole job. Other factors of a different but no less important type are also necessary for a full account of meaning. Most significantly, Grice argued that these other, non-semantic factors are not a random collection entirely dependent on individual speakers and contexts, but can be systematised and explained in terms of general principles and rules. The principles that explain how natural language differs from logic can also explain a wide range of other features of human communication.

In this novel attitude, Grice was certainly rejecting formal approaches, with their claim that the only meaning amenable to philosophical discussion was that which could be described in terms of truth-conditions, and could enter into truth-functional relationships. But also, and perhaps more surprisingly, he was rejecting a belief in everyday use as the chief, or indeed the only, location of meaning. This was a central tenet of philosophy at Oxford while Grice was developing his theory of

conversation, or at least of that subsection of Oxford philosophy known as the philosophy of ordinary language. Grice himself was an active member of this subsection and is often referred to as a leading figure in the movement. However, his use of formal logic in explaining conversational meaning demonstrates that his heretical impulse extended even to ordinary language philosophy itself. Indeed, the success of his theory of conversational implicature has been credited with the eventual demise of this movement as a viable philosophical approach.⁴ Grice's readiness to question conventions, even those of his own subdiscipline, makes him hard to categorise in terms of the usual philosophical distinctions. He does not sit easily on either side of the familiar dichotomies; he is neither exactly empiricist nor exactly rationalist, neither behaviourist nor mentalist. This makes synoptic discussions of his work difficult, as is perhaps entirely appropriate for a philosopher who readily expressed his dislike of attempts to divide philosophy up into a series of '-ologies' and '-isms'.

The theory of conversation is undoubtedly the best known of Grice's work. The particular, and often exclusive, emphasis on it can be explained perhaps in part by its intrinsic potential as a tool for linguistic analysis, and perhaps also, more accidentally, by the historical inaccessibility of much of his other writing. A notorious perfectionist, Grice was seldom happy that his work had reached a finished, or acceptable, state, and was therefore always reluctant to publish. Those who knew him have related this reluctance to the penetration of his own philosophical vision, turned as relentlessly on his own work as on that of others. His Oxford colleague Peter Strawson has suggested that this resulted in an uncomfortable degree of self-doubt:

I suspect, sometimes, that it was the strength of his own critical powers, his sense of the vulnerability of philosophical argument in general, that partially accounted, at the time, for his privately expressed doubts about the ability of his own work to survive criticism. After all, if there were always some detectable flaws in others' reasoning, why should there not be detectable, even though by him undetected, flaws in his own?⁵

Certainly, Grice's account of conversation as an essentially cooperative enterprise is generally discussed, and frequently criticised, in isolation from the rest of this work, seen as a free-standing account of linguistic interaction. It is paraphrased, often in just a few pages, in most introductory text books on pragmatics and discourse analysis.⁶ It has

been used or referred to in analyses of gendered language, children's language, code switching, courtroom cross-examination, the language of jokes, oral narrative and the language of liturgy, along with many other topics.⁷ However, it is only one aspect of a large and diverse body of work from a career of over four decades. In the context of this work, it can be seen as an intrinsic part of the gradual development of Grice's thinking on a range of philosophical topics. It also offers an analytic tool that Grice himself applied in his later work to a variety of philosophical problems, although never to the data of actual conversation. To some extent, then, Grice's later use of the theory of conversation offers its own explanation of the significance, and the theoretical purpose, of that work. More than that, however, Grice's less-known work merits attention in its own right. It ranges over a wide range of topics: not just the philosophy of language but epistemology, perception, logic, rationality, ethics and metaphysics. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a number of running threads, and some striking continuities of theme and approach, throughout this diverse *oeuvre*. Grice himself argued that the disparate themes and ideas of his career displayed a fundamental unity.⁸ In general, however, as Richard Grandy and Richard Warner observe in their introduction to *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality*, 'the systematic nature of his work is little recognised'.⁹

Throughout his work Grice focused on aspects of human behaviour, linguistic or otherwise, and the mental processes underlying them. Increasingly central in his work was the idea that an analysis of these processes revealed people to be rational creatures, and that this rationality was fundamental to human nature. In an overview of his own work, Grice himself suggested, with typical tentativeness, that: 'It might be held that the *ultimate* subject of all philosophy is ourselves.'¹⁰ He also displayed a sophisticated respect for common sense as a starting point in philosophical inquiry. It is sophisticated in that he did not espouse the straightforward adoption of common sense attitudes and terminology into philosophy. Rather, he urged that the philosopher remain aware of how the themes of philosophical inquiry are usually understood by non-philosophers. In a large part, this meant paying serious attention to the language in which particular issues were ordinarily discussed, or to what Grice once described as 'our carefree chatter'.¹¹ In this focus at least he retained an approach recognisable from his background in ordinary language philosophy. However, he proved himself ready to go beyond the dictates of common sense where the complexity of the subject matter demanded. Philosophy, he argued, is a difficult subject

that deals with difficult issues, and it is often necessary to posit entities not current in everyday thought: to construct theoretical, empirically unverifiable entities if they are explanatorily useful. Within these parameters, as he once suggested, 'whatever does the job is respectable'.¹² He was certainly not a simple egalitarian in philosophy. In the early 1980s he noted down, apparently for his own edification, the following complaint:

It repeatedly astonishes me that people who would themselves readily admit to being devoid of training, experience, or knowledge in philosophy, and who have plainly been endowed by nature with no special gifts of philosophical intelligence should be so ready to instruct professional philosophers about the contents of the body of philosophical truths.¹³

Despite his readiness to add entities to philosophical explanations when this seemed appropriate, Grice was concerned that such explanations should remain as simple as possible, in the philosophical sense of simplicity as drawing on as few entities as possible. In the lectures on conversation he endorsed 'Modified Occam's Razor', which he defined as '*senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity*'.¹⁴ This philosophical parsimony was carried over into other areas of his work; he sought general explanations that would account for as wide a range of subject matter, for as few theoretical constructions, as possible. If he prized philosophical simplicity, Grice's ideas were often far from reductive in more general terms. In particular, he did not shrink from explanations that saw people as separate and different: different from animals, in terms of communicative behaviour, or from automata, in terms of rational thought.

More generally, Grice sustained an enthusiasm for the business of philosophy itself, accompanied by a conviction, unfashionable at the start of his career, that the works of philosophers from other schools of thought and different ages deserve thoughtful and continual re-analysis. His work reveals a belief that philosophical investigation and analysis are worthwhile ventures in their own right and a willingness to employ them to offer suggested approaches, rather than completed solutions, to philosophical problems. Further, Grice was always ready to hunt out and consider as many possible counter-arguments and refutations of his own ideas as he could envisage, often advancing some particular idea by means of a detailed discussion of an actual or potential challenge to it. These factors together lend a 'discursive' and at times a

frustratingly tentative air to Grice's work. But despite the earnestness of Grice's interest in philosophy, and the rigour with which he pursued it, his tone was often playfully irreverent. This was, to some extent, the result of a deliberate policy that philosophy could, indeed should, be fun. 'One should of course be serious about philosophy', he argued, 'but being serious does not require one to be solemn.'¹⁵ Grice was not a gifted public speaker, given to elaborate divergences in exegeses, and to stuttering and even mumbling in presentation.¹⁶ Nevertheless, his presentations could be entertaining occasions; tape recordings of him speaking about philosophy, both informally and formally, are often punctuated by laughter.

Grice himself suggested that his search for the fun, even the funny in philosophy was prompted by 'the wanton disposition which nature gave me'.¹⁷ But it had been reinforced 'by the course of every serious and prolonged philosophical association to which I have been a party; each one has manifested its own special quality which at one and the same time has delighted the spirit and stimulated the intellect'. He had no time for those whose method of conducting philosophical debate was that of 'nailing to the wall everything in sight'. In his view, philosophy was best when it was a collaborative, supportive activity. This idea was, to some extent, inherent in his philosophical background; ordinary language philosophy was frequently undertaken as a group activity. However, it is an idea that was peculiarly suited to his personality. Grice could be extremely convivial; he was often surrounded by people, and preferred to develop his ideas by discussion rather than by solitary composition. He was no ascetic; he ate, drank and smoked copiously. But conviviality is not the same as affability. His delight in philosophical discussion often spilled over into an intense desire to 'win' the argument. He could be curt in response to points of view with which he was not in sympathy. On those occasions when he sought intuitive responses to his linguistic examples, he could be dismissive of those who got it 'wrong'. Moreover, those who know him have suggested that at times his tendency towards self-doubt could manifest itself in gloominess, even moroseness.¹⁸

Grice's tendency was to become entirely absorbed with whatever he was engaged in, if it interested him intellectually. Often this was some philosophical issue of substance or of composition. His wife Kathleen recalls that he frequently stayed up late into the night, often pacing up and down as he battled with some problem.¹⁹ Sometimes other people were caught up in this absorption. During his time at Oxford, he conducted a long collaboration with Peter Strawson. In later life, Grice

himself would recount how he was once phoned up by Strawson's wife who told him to stop bothering her husband with late night phone calls.²⁰ This obsessiveness was characteristic of all the activities to which he devoted his considerable energies. Kathleen remembers that he was always engaged on some project; if it was not philosophy then it was playing the piano, or chess, bridge or cricket. These last two were more absorbing than mere hobbies. He played both bridge and cricket competitively at county level. Cricket, in particular, was an obsession that almost rivalled philosophy; he played for a number of different clubs and 'became an inelegant but extremely effective and prolific opening batsman'.²¹ During his Oxford career, he spent the large part of each summer on cricket tours.

Grice's immense energy in these different directions was undoubtedly aided by the amount of time he had at his disposal, in part the consequence of not having to concern himself too much with everyday practicalities; according to Kathleen, from childhood onwards he always had, or found, people to look after him. He certainly pursued his interests to the exclusion of the mundane, often neglecting food and sleep if a particular problem, or game, had his attention. In those areas where he did have practical responsibility, Grice was legendarily untidy. He took little concern over his clothes, or his personal appearance generally. His desk was constantly covered by huge and apparently unsorted piles of paper. However, he would not allow anyone else to touch these, claiming that he knew exactly where everything was. After he died, these papers were deposited in the Bancroft library at the University of California, Berkeley, as the H. P. Grice Papers. This archive, which amounts to 14 large cartons, contains whatever Grice had about himself at the end of his life, mainly heaped on his desk or crammed under his bed. It consists largely of papers from after his move to Berkeley in 1967. But it also includes those papers from his Oxford days, dating right back to the 1940s, that had seemed important enough to him to take and keep with him.

The cartons contain a mixture of finished manuscripts, draft versions, lecture notes and odd jottings. These are often crammed with writing, but never with anything extraneous to the matter in hand; it seems that Grice never doodled. They offer some clue to at least one reason for Grice's reluctance to publish. Grice seems to have been more struck than most by the essentially inconclusive nature of his own work; no project was, for him, ever really completed, or ever separate from the work that preceded and followed it. So notes and manuscripts were stored along with those from decades earlier if they were perceived to be on a related

theme. Papers covered in Grice's cramped hand in faint pencil, characteristic of his work from Oxford, were annotated and added to by notes in ball-point made years later in Berkeley. Ideas generally associated exclusively with his late work, such as those relating to rationality and to finality, are explored in notes dating back to the 1960s. Work often remained in manuscript form for so long that it needed to be updated as the years went by. In the original version of 'Indicative conditionals', part of the William James lectures of 1967, Grice uses the example: 'Either Wilson or MacMillan will be P.M.'. At a later date 'MacMillan' has been crossed out and 'Heath' written over the top in a different coloured ink. This was the example used when the lecture was eventually published.²²

Above all, the H. P. Grice papers confirm that for Grice there was no real distinction between life and work. He was not in the habit of keeping regular hours of work, or of distinguishing between philosophical and private concerns. In the same way, his current philosophical preoccupation would spill over into his everyday life. Any piece of paper that came to hand would be covered in logical notation, example sentences, trial lists of words, invented dialogues, or whatever else was preoccupying him at that moment, all written in what Grice himself described as 'a hand which few have seen and none have found legible'.²³ So the cartons contain not just the orthodox pages of ruled note paper, but also a miscellany of correspondence (often unopened), financial statements, menus, paper napkins, playing card boxes, cigarette packets and even airline sick bags that came to hand as ideas occurred to him during a flight. Some of these suggest that Grice's writing style was not as spontaneous as it may sometimes appear. Certainly the manuscripts of articles and the lecture notes, always written out in full, were produced in longhand with little significant revision. But Grice was not averse to jotting down what he once described as 'useful verbiage' in preparation for these. In conjunction with some work on the place of value in human nature drawing on, but diverging from a number of previous philosophers including John Stuart Mill, he noted down the phrase: 'so as not to be just Grice to your Mill . . .'.²⁴ While working on an account of value and freedom drawing on both Aristotle and Kant, he tried out possible hybrids: 'Ariskant? Kantotle?'.²⁵

This book considers Grice's work within a broadly chronological framework, following the course of his philosophical life. However, because Grice did not work on discreet topics in neat succession, it is sometimes necessary to group together strands of work on related topics even where they in fact extend over years or decades. Nevertheless, the

chronological arrangement makes possible an understanding of the development, as well as the remarkable unity, of Grice's thinking. It also allows some scope for considering the impact on it of the work of other philosophers, and of the various personal associations he formed throughout his life. The final chapter is concerned with the impact of Grice's ideas on linguistics. It is concerned with the development of what has become known as 'Gricean pragmatics' and therefore concentrates on responses to the theory of conversation.

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