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An 'Heir to the Subject which Used to Be Called Philosophy'- Philosophical Issues From a Technological Point of View

Nyíri was among the first to label Wittgenstein as a conserative - traditionalist thinker. This idea has gained support from a number of Wittgenstein scholars[1] and reappears in the book reviewed here in the context of communication technology as Nyíri is applying and elaborating certain tenets of an influential theory proposed by Eric Havelock, Jack Goody and Ian Watt, Walter J. Ong, and Marshall McLuhan which claims that the natural accompaniment of fully developed literacy is critical - rational thought, whereas in an oral culture one assimilates traditions the truth-content of which " is not allowed to be called into question"[2]. Besides pulling motley threads together (using 'data' provided by sociology (Emile Durkheim, Karl Mannheim), literature (Robert Musil, Karl Kraus), linguistics and anthropology), Nyíri brings home a number of themes to the Central - Eastern European reader in essays on the role of the scientific and artitistic tendencies developed in the ailing Austro-Hungarian empire in shaping 20th-century philosophical thinking, on Istvan Hajnal's oeuvre (containing important documents of an early realization of certain consequences of literacy) and on the Hungarian

language reform. The arguments I intend to focus on represent the most recent (and probably the most controversial) elements in Nyíri's work.

If we are to go along with the author as to the influence of communication technology on epistemology and philosophy of language as well as anthropology and political thinking, three initial steps should be taken.

1. Accepting "outer perspectives", that is, principles of explanation extrinsic to philosophy traditionally so called in our approach to matters usually looked upon as internal philosophical affairs. Theorists like Karl Marx, Georg Lukacs and Karl Mannheim successfully proposed such perspectives.

2. Appreciating the study of communication technology as yielding such a perspective.

3. Opting for the "great - divide theory"[3], i.e. understanding literacy as being an "engine" of linguistic and psychological change as well as social and institutional.

The age of 'secondary orality' (the age of electric technology) is characterized by Marshall McLuhan as "mythical and integral"[4]: the detachment of the cognitively autonomous individual of widespread literacy (in which the "objectivized representation of spoken thought" created

the "distance of the cognitive subject to its own mental contents"[5], as well as the mental contents of others) has come to an end: we live in an "overwhelming, continuous cognitive noise"[6], from which, just like in preliterate times, there is no way of distancing ourselves. Now Nyíri maintains that Wittgenstein's conception of rule-following and his denial of the possibility of a private language expose his 'oral bias' - the realization, as it were, of this cognitive noise. "Under the conditions of fully developed literacy", however, "the private language argument is false"[7], for the following reason. Mentalism (a cluster of doctrines explaining thought and language with reference to psychic entities or occurrences in the mind) is "intimately bound up with the visual experience of language"[8] which makes decontextualization, abstraction and private forms of thought possible. Language thus conceived is the representation of thought - just as written text is the representation of spoken language. Wittgenstein's criticism of private language leaves the mental *reality* (private thoughts, ideas) created by literacy out of consideration, denying the possibility of something actual.

It has been emphasized by a number of authors that the private language argument does not take up

the empirical problem of memory, i.e. it is not engaged in ascertaining whether my memory is reliable or deceptive when I am affirming that a particular sensation is the same as the one I had before; what Wittgenstein is interested in is the meaningfulness of such an assertion[9]. I would like to suggest, in a similar spirit, that the private language argument is *not concerned with 'what there is' in the individual mind* - it does not exclude the possibility that private mental entities of some kind exist. Therefore, affirming that fully developed literacy does produce such objects does not justify the statement that the argument loses its validity outside the cognitive situation created by orality. What the private language argument seeks to establish is, rather, the logical impossibility of private ostensive definitions. The private linguist makes out to fix the meaning of 'S' by an act of naming a particular sensation. One might think he will be capable of identifying the sensation on a subsequent occurrence simply by establishing the sameness of the two, using 'S', thereby, in a meaningful manner. This is denied by Wittgenstein on the grounds that " whatever is going to seem right to me is right" (*Philosophical Investigations*, § 258); that is, no criterion of correctness can be found. Therefore, 'S' is not used meaningfully.

This argument not only allows of the existence of mental entities, but it is to a large extent *independent of matters of content*: "it is equally concerned with experience, notably with visual experiences"[10]. No wonder it should be so: for the empiricist (the *par excellence* mentalist), everything that is thinkable and communicable makes its debut in the mind as an impression. Therefore, Nyíri's remark that the arguments for the possibility of a private language come up with visual examples, whereas those denying the intelligibility of private criteria tend to make use of auditive phenomena does not seem to be conducive to a justified rejection of the argument with regard to literacy. Naturally, this is not to deny that the idea of the impossibility of a private language might have been *prompted* by a conception of language which is linked to the 'community-view' of rule-following. This fact, however, does not delimit its validity.

Nyíri affirms that under the prevalence of orality the private language argument is bound to hold, since it is only through the reactions of other members of the community that the individual can check on the reliability of his memory, as opposed to the 'literate' who is "essentially

capable of comparing visual signs in order to establish the identity or difference of written texts"[11]. In orality, "correct recollection is a matter of consensus, memory is a collective faculty, privacy of thought, in any philosophically interesting sense, inconceivable"[12]. Now when we admit 'memory' into the discussion of private language, it seems that the word is used in a different sense in this context. The contents of collective memory or collective knowledge are ideas that foster group-cohesion (such as myths and political propaganda). However, in orality as well as in literacy two persons may disagree on the question of whether the boar in front of them is the same as the one they saw the day before; and it is precisely *criteria of sameness* the possibility of which is brought into doubt by the private language argument rather than bits of collective knowledge - which is itself remarkably vague and difficult to grasp. Let my satyrs be auburn as opposed to your blond satyrs - we may nevertheless belong to the same pre-literate community and be understood to share the same contents of collective consciousness. Thus, the statement that in a non-literate society one is denied the cognitive freedom he uses when visualising his own *Gregor Samsa*[13] calls for certain qualifications.

Moreover, mentalism is not given its due on the above interpretation. Idiosyncrasies do not necessarily derive from qualitative differences between ideas that inhabit the minds of different individuals - it is not *his conception* of causality that Hume gives an analysis of; rather, he makes an attempt to establish a genesis that our (only numerically different) ideas of causality share. The empiricist is bound to rebut a 'community-view' involved in a theory of communication on the grounds that ideas are essentially private - which only means that it is exclusively the speaker/hearer who is capable of *identifying* ideas as to be connected to certain expressions (the fact that *theoretically* you might mean by 'red' the colour I call 'blue' does not imply that our sets of colour-ideas are different: "the sensible ideas produced by any object in different men's minds are most commonly very near and undiscernibly alike"[14]).

My concluding remark concerning the private language argument is that it is debatable whether a 'community-view' is actually *implied* by it (note again the logical character of the problem):

"The moral of the tale is not that there is no such thing as following a rule in private. That would be absurd, since we do so frequently. There is no

conceptual barrier to envisaging solitary creatures who follow rules...Nor is it the case that one cannot follow private rules, i.e rules no one else happens to know about, for many people do so, e.g. when writing diaries in private codes. Rather, the moral is that there is no such thing as following 'private' rules, i.e. rules which no one else could in principle understand inasmuch as the rules in question can have no public expression"[15].

The 'use-theory' of meaning is criticized by Nyíri along similar lines. Use is something 'living' - it is tied to 'action'. Writing and reading are, on the other hand, "more aptly described in categories like deliberation and contemplation than in the terminology of actions"[16]. It is the meaning of the written sign that 'gives it life'. But what *this* meaning consists in cannot be clarified by reference to the *use* of the sign (or, for that matter, by a name-relation theory). These statements might be thought to suggest that different media of communication produce different word-meanings. (This is, *in abstracto,* not inconceivable: it is not incompatible with the idea (rejected with respect to literacy) that the meaning of a word is its use: one could argue that a word is used in different ways in writing and in speech. Nyíri affirms, however,

that written words "represent" spoken. Thus, the same word *in the same sentence* would have a different meaning when written. This view, it seems to me, calls for something other than a *theory of meaning,* for the latter is normally required to take the *whole* of language into account, disregarding such distinctions as written - spoken. (The possibility of claiming (in a rather vacuous manner) that the written word *means* its spoken counterpart seems to have been ruled out by the rejection of name-relation theories).

Apart from the fact that it is the task of disciplines like sociology and psychology to estimate the degree to which our lives are actually pervaded by orality, the theory seems to be too comprehensive to be put to the test. Nevertheless, certain explanations and predictions concerning new behavioural patterns in communities reshaped by technological advance can be criticized.

It is claimed to be the essential characteristic of pre-literate and post-literate societies that the individual is an organic part of the community, receives environmental stimuli in a comparatively unreflective manner (the examples offered in connection with 'secondary orality' usually refer to debilitating television programmes like advertisements and video clips),

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assimilating imperceptibly 'customs, values and traditions' as communicated by the mass media. Thus, by entering the new phase of the history of technology, the individual has to a large extent lost his autonomy and capability of critical thinking.

The assimilation of the traditions (in a very broad sense) imposed on the annihilated individual by the community should mean that he/she is unburdened of the bulk of decision-making due to the orientating and integrating character of the society. However, it is not self-evident that we indeed live in such societies. In fact, we may still feel deep sympathy with the cultural pessimism of the truly traditionalist Wittgenstein.

Let me quote a passage Bouveresse adduces to show that Musil was inclined to think in our age "the individual finds himself in a situation of uncertainty which he no longer succeeds in dominating"[17]. (Musil is one of the authors whose sentiments towards the human milieu of his time bear a close affinity to those of Wittgenstein).

"What we call civilization is, in fact, essentially, nothing more than the fact that the individual finds himself laden with the burden of questions of which he hardly knows the first word (just think of political democracy and newspapers). Consequently it is quite normal that he should react in a completely pathological manner; today we impute any shopkeeper with decisions in which a conscientious choice would not be possible even for a Leibniz."[18]

While humanity is supposed to become unified in a global embrace, "the ultimate harmony of all being"[19], extensive literature on the postmodern condition gives us enough reason to believe that there cannot be a 'whole story' either for the community (in the manner pre-literate societies offered such 'stories') or for the individual - as opposed to the individual of the 'modern'. (Note that Nyíri uses the terms 'post-modern' and 'post-literate' as synonyms[20]).

We read in *Culture and Value*[21]: "A culture is like a big organization which assigns each of its members a place where he can work in the spirit of the whole; and it is perfectly fair for his power to be measured by the contribution he succeeds in making to the whole enterprise. In an age without culture [that is, in our age] on the other hand, forces become fragmented and the power of an individual man is used up in overcoming opposing forces and frictional resistances".

The scope of validity of this analysis is certainly not limited to the early decades of the century. Jürgen

Habermas in *Legitimation Crisis*[22] gives the following diagnosis: "Complex societies are no longer held together and integrated through normative structures. Their unity is no longer established intersubjectively through communications penetrating the minds of socially related individuals." However, says Habermas, without 'identity-securing world-views', without an order with cognitive and moral significance it is impossible to develop the unity of the personality[23].

I find the idea that the chasm between the postmodern and the previous ages (literate or preliterate) might be deeper than the one between preliteracy grouped together with post-literacy and 'literacy fully unfolded' worth considering. At least two lines of reasoning could be plausible. We could argue that "inevitably the elevation of the idea of liberty has led to the debasement of the idea of authority"[24] - authority, which is an essential element in all conservative-traditionalist thinking. Both the pre-literate and the literate individual defined themselves in relation to world-views devised for "the avoidance of chaos, that is, the overcoming of contingency"[25] which presuppose some authority condemned by the ideology of ideology-neutrality as an agent of coercion. Thus, in the era of liberal-ism, the renaissance of the tradition-bound, undetached individual celebrated by theorists like McLuhan proves to be an illusion.

The technological pessimist, on the other hand, would argue - to borrow an observation made by an optimist - that "computerization seems...to have brought about already a technological acceleration which is such as to make even the most recent past irrelevant and even the most imminent future radically unforesee-able"[26], which inevitably increases uncertainty, distrust and disintegration. The idea of 'equal chances' offered by widespread computer-use has also proved untenable due to the realization that without adequate aids in discerning relevant information from irrelevant the computer-user is precluded from making real use of the data accessible. Also, mass media might well contribute to the fragmented experience of 'atomized, dislocated, frustrated selves'[27].

Nyíri assigns to Wittgenstein a degree of ignorance of major motives of his own thinking. The cultural pessimism, the contempt towards technological progress exhibited in several writings from 1930 are seen as indicating the fact that he had failed to sort out certain theoretical implications of technological change. Wittgenstein, Nyíri maintains, is "the

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philosopher of a new orality - dreaming of pre-literal times, the times of old orality"[28].

It seems to me that the idea of a secondary orality is not essential for an explanation of Wittgenstein's traditionalism - in fact, the description of the *traditions* the absence of which he resents also applies to modern European culture and, as Musil writes, a "unitarian ideology [that] never again will...give birth to itself in our white society"[29]. Bouveresse is using the word when discussing Wittgenstein's artistc tastes in this sense:

"He most certainly shared Kraus' cultural pessimism and his conviction that the great cultural works are already behind and not in front of us, his cult of tradition and his scepticism with regard to the future of the forms of art the most representative of the spirit of the age. Wittgenstein, like Kraus, had the distinct tendency to use the great classics, especially Goethe, Schiller, Lessing and Mörike, as an antidote to the literary production of his time which...he did not appreciate"[30].

The picture Nyíri gives of Wittgenstein's traditionalist leanings in an earlier essay (republished in *Tradition and Individuality*) where he argues that "Wittgenstein's attitude towards the liberal idea of progress is that of a conservative"; that

Wittgenstein felt obliged to be loyal to any genuine authority and that Spengler's book *The Decline of the West* had a significant influence on him, is also reconcilable with this interpretation.

Wittgenstein's cultural views are neither anti-individualistic nor hostile to the modern: by the 'loss of energy' we experience the individual is as much weakened as the whole in the spirit of which its members should work: individual achievements and the cohesion of the community presuppose each other; therefore, says Wittgenstein, "in times like these genuine strong characters simply leave the arts aside and turn to other things and somehow *the worth of the individual man finds expression*"[31].

It is a most demanding task to assess changes in progress, sociological or philosophical. As we have seen, these phenomena can be put into at least one alternative context (which, naturally, alters our views about what the phenomena *are*). As Nyíri affirms in his recent Hungarian volume[32], the integrative endeavours relying on revived pre-war traditions of the Hungarian conservative government between 1990 and 1994 failed. This failure, however, not only illustrates the fact that different traditions have different capacities but also that when thinking about tradition, progress and

community we have to deal with a multi-factor interplay.

"The effects of literacy on intellectual and social change are not straightforward...it is misleading to think of literacy in terms of consequences. What matters is what people do with literacy, not what literacy does to people"[33].

[1] See D. Bloor, *Wittgenstein. A Social Theory of Knowledge,* Columbia University Press, 1983 p. 160. and A. O'Hear,'Wittgenstein and the Transmission of Traditions' in (ed.) A. P. Griffiths, *Wittgenstein Centenary Essays,* Cambridge University Press, 1991 p. 41.

[2] Nyíri (1992), p.76.

[3] (eds.) D. R. Olson and N. Torrance, *Literacy and Orality,* Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.7.

[4] M. McLuhan:*Understanding Media,* ARK Paperbacks, 1987, p.4.

[5] Nyíri (1992), p. 76.

[6] ibid., p. 111.

[7] ibid., p. 113.

[8] ibid., p. 105.

[9] see H-J. Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary,* Blackwell, 1996, p. 312.

[10] ibid., p. 311.

[11] Nyíri (1992), p. 108.

[12] ibid., p. 111.

[13] ibid., p. 112.

[14] J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* Dover Publications Inc., New York, 1959; II. xxxii. 15.

[15] P. M. S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion,* Clarendon Press, 1986 p. 271.

[16] Nyíri (1992), p. 112.

[17] J. Bouveresse, "The darkness of this time': Wittgenstein and the Modern World' in Griffiths, p.29.

[18] R. Musil, *Der deutsche Mensch als Symptom,* reprinted in *Gesammelte Werke,* (ed.) A. Frise, Hamburg, 1978 vol. 8. p.1367.

[19] M. McLuhan, p. 5.

[20] See Nyíri (1992), p. 147.

[21] L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* Blackwell, 1980, p.6.

[22] J. Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis,* Heinemann Books, London, 1976 p. 131.

[23] The atmosphere of uncertainty and distrust has been manifest in the social sciences as well: Wissenssoziologie "takes on pertinence [under conditions where] conflicting perspectives and interpretations within the same society [lead to an] active and reciprocal distrust between groups". R. K. Merton, 'The Sociology of Knowledge' in (eds.) G. Gurvitch and E. Wilbert: *Twentieth Century Sociology,* New York: The Philosophical Library, 1945 cited in a different context by Nyíri (1992), p. 26.

[24] The Introduction by Gertrud Himmelfarb to J. S. Mill: *On Liberty,* Penguin, 1974, p.8.

[25] Habermas, p. 118.

[26] Nyíri (1992) cites W. Ong, *The Presence of the Word,* Minneapolis, 1967, pp. 301 f. and 313.

[27] A phrase by M. J. Sandel, 'Morality and the Liberal Ideal', New Republic 7 May 1984:17

[28] Nyíri (1992), p. 103.

[29] R. Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften,* reprinted in *Gesammelte Werke,* vol. 1. p. 176., cited by Bouveresse, p. 30.

[30] Bouveresse, p. 31.

[31] L. Wittgenstein (1980), p. 6.

[32] Nyíri, J. K., *A hagyomány filozófiája,* T-Twins, 1994

[33] D. R. Olson, A. Hildyard and N. Torrance, *Literacy, Language and Learning: The Nature and Consequences of Reading and Writing,* Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 14.