

The Word as Decision — Aspects of Linguistic Philosophy*

The idea that language exercises a power over man is as old as Humboldt and his doctrine that language contains a 'view of the world'. Our whole feeling, volition and thinking have always been 'canalized', i. e. guided by an understanding of the world and of life indicated for us in advance by the language we speak.

However, it is not this general complex of ideas from the sphere of linguistic philosophy that concerns us here, but what is uttered in and through language concretely in a definite situation. The object of my enquiry is the 'power of the word', that is the power exerted by the spoken word on reality and above all on us, the speakers. This presupposes a conviction, which it is still incumbent on me to establish, that the spoken word is not simply a post facto piece of information about a pre-existent state of affairs, or a post facto announcement of an already extant inner circumstance, but a deliberate act in which reality itself is transformed, a contribution to the active shaping not only of outward reality but also of our own inner being, our human substance. I shall try to demonstrate this process with the aid of one or two telling examples, to understand which we must endeavour to penetrate into previously unexplored (and barely explorable) depths of the human soul. One philosopher to make a lasting contribution to our understanding of these problems was Hans Lipps, whose works on the 'Obligation of Language' and the 'Potency of the World'¹ were attempts to [187/188] cast light on these elusive phenomena. Hans Lipps, who fell into oblivion after his early death during the last war, seems to me to have achieved pioneering work in this sphere of philosophy, work whose full significance has not yet been entirely realized.

Perhaps I should begin with a joke I once read (it is of no consequence where). After a public lecture by an astronomer on the latest findings of research in his discipline, a member of the audience stood up and said: 'I can well see that you can measure the distances of heavenly bodies and the speeds at which they move; but what I can't for the life of me fathom is how you ever found out their names.' Clearly, we can only laugh at this as a piece of boundless foolishness, the names of heavenly bodies being the only unproblematical part of the whole science of astronomy: it was the astronomers themselves who gave the stars their names, so no research was necessary to find them out. But there is a serious side to this joke, in that it betrays the old belief that the names of things are somehow intimately connected with the things themselves.

Evidence for this belief is easy to find in the realm of magic, and I shall not dwell on it here. I should merely like to recall a last after-effect of this kind of view in the well-known fairytale Rumpelstilzchen, where the little man jubilantly rejoices 'No one will know from where I came or that Rumpelstilzchen is my name'. But he was overheard and so his power was destroyed. For the name and the bearer of the name were mysteriously linked, and whoever knew the name had power over the bearer of it. Expressed linguistically: 'According to a primitive view the name is an essential component of the person, and a knowledge of the name is a first step towards gaining power over the person or adopting an imagined existence' (Ammann). Similarly Levy-Bruhl in his *Denken der Naturvölker*: 'It is a magic act that is performed when words are spoken.'

But in our present context it is not the peculiarities of magical thought-processes that interest

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¹ H. Lipps, *Untersuchungen zu einer hermeneutischen Logik*, 1938, reprinted in *Schriften*, Volume II, 1976; and *Die Verbindlichkeit der Sprache*, 1944, reprinted in *Schriften*, Volume IV, 1977.

us, still less are we justified in believing that we think magically. No one today seriously believes that knowledge of a person's name gives us power over him, or that someone has a peculiar power over us when he knows our name. Nevertheless we may assume that the world of magic thought was not outright nonsense, but saw connexions in a way that we cannot perhaps reproduce today, but that may give us a clue by indicating phenomena which are analo- [188/189] gously effective in our (no longer magic) thought, though as a rule they escape our attention.

We could perhaps start from the idea that the very act of naming is a form of appropriation. By giving things names we incorporate them into our world, we make things identifiable for ourselves and thereby make them for the first time accessible to ourselves. What the name is, is in the first instance irrelevant – the main thing is that the object has a name of its own.

I do not propose to dwell on this original act of naming. For us, as speakers of our particular language, it is something that happened in the remote past and is to that extent part of the wider context of the function of language. For our present purposes we must observe the concretely spoken word, which in the simplest case can be a name. Imagine yourself in a specific situation confronted with something (an object or a circumstance). You recognize this something and you say 'This is a –', and then follows the name of what you have recognized this particular something as being.

We must, however, be careful to imagine a real situation, if we are to avoid the aimless triviality of schoolbook examples of the type 'This is a table'. There would be no point in uttering a sentence like that, when everybody could see it was a table. But a very different set of circumstances prevails when a doctor, standing at the patient's bedside and diagnosing difficult and perhaps unusual symptoms, suddenly says 'This is scarlet fever'. A parallel and even clearer case would be that of the prosecuting counsel pronouncing the indictment 'This was murder'.

What happens when the prosecuting counsel formulates these words? Whether the indictment is justified or not, what has happened is not merely that a situation that had been from the outset perfectly clear to everyone is then put into words, but rather that a situation that had up to that point been subject to any number of interpretations is suddenly given a certain slant. Something that had hitherto been unclear (it might, for instance, have been looked on as manslaughter) suddenly becomes clear and distinct the moment the word is enunciated, the moment it receives one specific name. In other words, the situation itself is changed: the word, once uttered, changes the situation and determines the course of action to be taken. The word deploys things into a fixed context. In Lipp's words, 'Things reveal themselves in the light of the decision that has been reached.' [189/190]

Even if the indictment were to turn out to be wrong, the situation would nevertheless continue to have been changed by it. Indeed, for the defendant this would be true in a very unfortunate manner. For he cannot simply ignore the accusation; he has to disprove it. He has to make a conscious effort to destroy the effect of the word once it has been spoken. So much is this the case, in fact, that even if the evidence brought against him should prove insufficient to demonstrate his guilt – more: even if his innocence were proved – something of the indictment would always 'stick'. And it is in this ineluctible *semper aliquid haeret* that we see in a particularly drastic form the uncanny power of the once spoken word.

A similar circumstance prevails in the case of suspicion. Whether a suspicion actually dawns on someone and grows within his breast, or whether he actually voices it, are two entirely different things. An unvoiced suspicion can, on more balanced reflexion, be entirely dispelled; but once it is uttered something irrevocable has happened. This accounts for the disproportionate gravity of an insult, that no amount of 'taking back' can ever actually remove. Not only has the word, once uttered, objectivized itself, but it has caused a permanent change

in the world.

For all their parallels, there are considerable differences of detail between the examples I have so far considered, and I have juxtaposed them primarily in order to demonstrate how the way in which the situation can be altered by utterance can vary considerably from case to case. In the case of the medical diagnosis it was specific illness that only had to be correctly recognized, and the reality was to some extent independent of language, so that it was really only a matter of putting a name to the thing. What was altered when the name was found was not the illness itself but the attitude of those involved to the illness, which was given a fixed direction by means of the diagnosis. The prosecutor's indictment for murder (as opposed to manslaughter or anything else) goes deeper than the doctor's diagnosis in that an extant state of affairs is grasped in a certain manner and thereby given a certain slant: it is one interpretation of the facts, and moreover one that cannot simply be deduced from observation of reality. From all this it is clear that we have varying degrees of profundity (though one would be hard put to it to draw hard and fast boundaries): an illness is recog- [190/191] nized as one particular illness, an act is understood as one particular crime, a mode of behaviour is interpreted as revealing one particular characteristic.

All these cases, however, have one thing in common: in all of them the change brought about by the power of the word is not a random transition from one situation to another, but a transition whose point of departure and final result bear a definite relation to one another. The transition is in all cases one from the indeterminate to the determined, from flux to solidity, from the vague to the meaningful, and as such it is an irreversible process: the certainty achieved by the appropriate word cannot again be dispelled; it can at best (and this is something quite different and something requiring specific effort) be destroyed by a new, more appropriate and therefore more powerful word.

From this position it is easy to see what Hans Lipps means when he speaks of the word as a decision. Once the word is uttered a Rubicon is crossed over which there is no return. In a fluid world, in which all is transience and haste, only the word stands out as something defying change.

Every word that is uttered not only clarifies the situation, it is also binding for the future. For this reason we can give another person 'our word' as a guarantee that we will do something in the future that we are at the moment not in a position or not prepared to carry out, and the other person can 'rely' on this word. The word becomes a promise, and a promise is perhaps the most impressive example of the power language has over the future. Lipps laid great stress on this in his reflexions on the 'potency of the word'.

As Lipps cogently reasons, a promise is not merely an announcement of intention; for my intention of today can change in the future, and a mere announcement of what I intend today could never provide the basis for that obligation that is peculiar to a promise and that is independent of all the vacillations of my inner state. Once I have given my word I am expected to 'keep' it or 'fulfil my promise' regardless of how I may feel at some future date. Here the word is exercising its right to be 'made true', thereby demonstrating that it is not merely an image of an extant reality and an act of communication of that image to another (as would be the case in a simple announcement of intention), but something that itself creates its own reality. First [191/192] comes the word, then the promise is fulfilled or made reality. 'Fulfilled' is a good way of defining this process: a hollow shape is filled up when it becomes reality. The word precedes, reality follows. In this sense the word transforms reality. As Lipps remarks, 'The word is primary and only later achieves the accolade of gradual realization.'

There is, however, a vital difference between this process and that observed in the earlier examples of a word defining a state of affairs. In those earlier cases the transformatory power lay in the very act of utterance, whereas here the word demands of us long and sustained

effort, often being fulfilled only at a remote point in time. The word is not fulfilled as soon as it is given – many a promise is made frivolously and later broken – but only when the promise is kept. What is important here-and important in the sense of a deeper anthropological understanding – is that it is not Man as a constant given entity who is doing something that causes a change in external reality, but that he is changing himself by what he does and in a certain sense creating himself; for as a person stands by the word he has once given and fulfils it in spite of all temptations and contrary inclinations, even in spite of all the unforeseeable circumstances that might have arisen in the meantime, he elevates himself above the mutability of a life which is, for all its innocence, amoral and becomes himself in the actual strict sense. Man becomes himself through the word to which he holds himself responsible. From this point of view both Hans Lipps and Gabriel Marcel, both independently of one another, have analysed the promise in a way that has proved it to be the key to the understanding of man's humanity. Disloyalty is not just one of many character failings, but means loss of identity. A disloyal person has gone off the rails and lost his very substance in the vagueness of a condition no longer responsible to itself. He finds himself in loyalty, and loyalty finds its true expression in loyalty to a word once given. At this point linguistic philosophy and fundamental ethical problems are inextricably interwoven. Man's self-identification is linked with language, and it is only as a being who is master of his own word that man can really be said to be 'himself'.

The relevance of this complex of ideas for educationalists is one that hardly needs stressing. A responsible attitude to one's word is not just one moral problem among many, but strikes at the innermost core of human self-identity. It holds a key-position [192/193] for the whole moral development of the child and therefore needs special attention from educators, demanding among other things the most scrupulous attitude to their own promises, for it is only in an environment in which a child experiences that a given word must at all costs be taken seriously that he can be expected to follow suit and stand by his own word.

Another way to influence the future linguistically, i. e. through the spoken word, is by means of a curse. However, whereas in the case of the promise it was in the hands of the promiser to fulfil his promise, to make it come true (inasmuch as his anticipation of the future was one concerning himself alone), in the case of the curse the speaker encroaches on the life of another by bringing inevitable misfortune on his head, evoking and creating it, and in this way the curse is fulfilled.

Many, especially the more temperamental among us, achieve a real mastery in this form of linguistic expression, but the way in which curses are used in everyday life today makes them more into safety-valves for the release of pent-up annoyance, and as such they are not curses in the proper sense of the word. But the very fact that curses of this kind usually break off in the middle of a sentence and are left unspoken, also the fact that the speaker uses all manner of circumlocutions for forces that he dare not call by their real names, forces, indeed, of which he is perhaps not fully conscious, is an indication that here deeper layers of the soul are coming to the surface that are otherwise beyond our control.

Again we are faced with the question as to the nature of the power exercised by the spoken word over the future. Perhaps we get closest to an answer if we consider an idea put forward by Spranger in his *Magie der Seele*: The forces of magic are no longer applied to external reality, for in this sphere they have indeed lost their power; but they retain their hold over the human soul.

But of course the curse is only an extreme borderline case used here to exemplify a more general situation. In all cases in which a situation has found shape through the committing and obligating power of the word we are experiencing the same (as it were) magic force of the word stamping its mould on a still amorphous reality.