

Language and its discontents: the false enemy

El lenguaje y sus descontentos: el falso enemigo

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ABSTRACT

The concept of false friends suggests that language is essentially misleading. Words seem to be similar to each other, but in fact often are not. This is an aspect of the general view in philosophy and religion that language is confusing. There is scope for linking the concept of false friends with the idea of false enemies, where terms appear to be opposite to each other and yet perhaps are not as polarized in reality. In fact, it is sometimes argued that we forget how things are really linked up. So we are typically frightened and upset by death, yet it is sometimes argued that it is unreasonable to see it as something to which we ought to be opposed. Death is a false enemy and the language that surrounds it acts to point us in erroneous directions. It is suggested that just as language is replete with false friends, false enemies may also be a significant feature. The result is to reinforce the thesis that language has to be approached with caution.

KEYWORDS

BUDDHISM, FALSE ENEMIES, FALSE FRIENDS, FORGETTING,
HEBREW BIBLE, ISLAM, LANGUAGE.

RESUMEN

El concepto de falsos amigos sugiere que el lenguaje es esencialmente engañoso. Las palabras parecen ser similares entre sí, pero, en realidad, a menudo no lo son. Este es un aspecto de la opinión general en filosofía y religión de que el lenguaje es confuso. Hay margen para vincular el concepto de falsos amigos con la idea de falsos enemigos, donde los términos parecen ser opuestos entre sí y, sin embargo, tal vez no estén tan polarizados en realidad. De hecho, a veces se argumenta que olvidamos cómo se relacionan realmente las cosas. Normalmente, nos asusta y

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nos molesta la muerte, aunque a veces se argumenta que no es razonable verla como algo a lo que deberíamos oponernos. La muerte es un falso enemigo y el lenguaje que la rodea actúa para señalarnos direcciones erróneas. Se sugiere que, así como el lenguaje está repleto de falsos amigos, los falsos enemigos también pueden ser una característica importante. El resultado es reforzar la tesis de que el lenguaje debe abordarse con cautela.

PALABRAS CLAVE

BUDISMO, FALSOS ENEMIGOS, FALSOS AMIGOS, OLVIDO, BIBLIA HEBREA, ISLAM, IDIOMA.

ONE OF THE FEATURES OF THE ANALYSIS of false friends, a notion explored in such fine details by Pedro Chamizo-Domínguez, is the idea that much of language is misleading. The idea that silence is important, that language is something we should be suspicious towards, is a venerable doctrine, albeit expressed in the very language that raises the suspicions. Buddhism is perhaps the most critical of language of the major world philosophies, often comparing it to a boat that one has to take to get from one side of the river to the other, but once we get there we are well advised to abandon it and not carry it with us wherever we continue to travel. Suspicion of language is perhaps really a form of nominalism, suspicion of essences, of the idea that words have fixed meanings and we can become aware of what they are, and yet is not this doctrine itself an example of the use of language and acceptance of its implicit essences? It could be what mystics refer to as an experience, where the fixed meanings familiar to us through our use of our normal language and its ideas comes to be revealed as empty. After all we are familiar with the ways that our concepts attempt to grip on things and sometimes do not seem to do it successfully, and the ways in which the complexity of our ideas appears to fail to line up against the simplicity of how we may see the world. Those familiar dichotomies, the esoteric and the exoteric, the hidden and the open, the many and the one, this world and the next world, God as transcendent and as immanent, these may dissolve in experiences resulting from meditation, for instance, and from what is taken to be experience of the holy,

I. FALSE FRIENDS AND ENEMIES

We tend to think in terms of false friends in the sense of concepts that appear to be close to one another, and not often of what I would like to

call false enemies, concepts that look as though they are contraries yet often are much looser than they appear. Religions often stress factors like moderation and balance in order to explain how God can be both distant and present, majestic and kind, aware of the particular and the universal. We tend to see analysis as breaking things up into their smallest parts in order to examine and understand them, and yet it is often the case that we only really understand something if we see it as a whole. This is something we often find in the works of mystically inclined thinkers, an argument that things have to be brought together if we are to understand, that God is both transcendent and immanent, *tanzih* and *tashbih*, beautiful and powerful, *jalal* and *jamal*, open and hidden, *batin* and *zahir* and so on. When we want to say how can He be both, since these concepts do not really go together, we get perhaps to the limits of language and this serves as an argument against the use of language in dealing with such issues. And yet what else have we got to use? It might be said that language can take us only so far, and that once we have got to where we need to go, like crossing the river in the boat, we should relinquish it. Here language is itself a false friend, and a very tempting one at that.

All sorts of issues arise here and are linked with the discussion. Can we think without language? This becomes significant when we consider the sort of thinking possible for animals? Living things can certainly notice things without language and some would say that the lives of severely brain damaged individuals can remain worthwhile given their capacity, if they have it, to notice things and be aware of changes like different sounds and colors. Paradoxically, when one reads accounts of what it would be like to be enlightened according to some versions of Buddhist and Vedantic thought, it involves the very basic awareness of what is around us that is available to those operating with very limited intellectual equipment, since that sort of awareness is largely focused on the moment and eschews wider ideas and possibilities. That is certainly the case with a lot of the language surrounding mindfulness, where the point is to concentrate on experience and not make judgements about that experience. This is very different from what might be regarded as more advanced forms of meditation where judgment very much comes into place, since we are supposed to be using our experience to think about things more widely than just to focus on the experiences we are having. For instance, a popular form of meditation

is contemplating something rotting to familiarize ourselves with the phenomenon and indeed ubiquity of death, and not react to it with horror and fear.

What is involved in these thought processes can be entirely normal philosophy. Spinoza tells us that a free man thinks of death and his thinking about death is really about life, while Daoist thinkers often suggest that we think about death, even the death of those close to us, as a way of familiarizing ourselves with it and no longer being frightened or even upset by it.

When Zhuangzi's wife died, Huizi came to the house to join in the rites of mourning. To his surprise he found Zhuangzi sitting with an inverted bowl on his knees, drumming upon it and singing a song.

"After all," said Huizi, "she lived with you, brought up your children, grew old with you. That you should not mourn for her is bad enough, but to let your friends find you drumming and singing--that is going too far!"

"You misjudge me," said Zhuangzi. "When she died, I was in despair, as any man well might be. But soon, pondering on what had happened, I told myself that in death no strange new fate befalls us. In the beginning, we lack not life only, but form. Not form only, but spirit. We are blended in one great featureless indistinguishable mass. Then a time came when the mass evolved spirit, spirit evolved form, form evolved life. And now life in its turn has evolved death. For not nature only but man's being has its seasons, its sequence of spring and autumn, summer and winter. If someone is tired and has gone to lie down, we do not pursue him with shouting and bawling. She whom I have lost has lain down to sleep for a while in the Great Inner Room. To break in upon her rest with the noise of lamentation would but show that I knew nothing of nature's Sovereign Law. That is why I ceased to mourn." (Zhuangzi 1956: 18.15-19; Watson 1968: 191-92)

This is a bit like Buddhist meditation in the sense that we start with a thought process and the aim is not to come to an intellectual conclusion alone, although this is part of the aim, but to arrive at a feeling. The aim is to change our emotional state, and to leave the boat behind, as it were. We are accustomed to feel sad about death, and so death might be described as a false enemy, since according to Spinoza and Daoism it is nothing to worry about. Buddhism is especially critical of what it sees as false dichotomies like self/other, me/you, this world/the next world, this time/the next time and so on, and yet these are very familiar to us in everyday life, we use

them all the time. This is a familiar strategy in philosophy, showing that what looks dissimilar is otherwise, and vice versa.

II. DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

On the other hand, this looks like a negation of much of what goes under the description of analysis since we think of this as the breaking down of complexity into its constituent parts and a procedure that allows us to understand the nature of what we are thinking about. What is wrong with seeing simplicity and complexity as real enemies, and now and the future as in contrast with each other also, and music and silence? We do contrast these things and for a good reason, they are very different from each other and in fact we often define them in contrast with each other. It seems quite obvious that this is something we should do and continue to do and so such dichotomies are not false enemies at all. They do not appear to be enemies because of a misunderstanding that can easily be resolved but rather they are real enemies since they are very different from each other. We go to a musical event, for example, to avoid silence, we play music to replace silence with noise and we have a clear idea of what silence is and what is different from it. What is wrong with such a contrast and surely any argument that it does not really exist is just obviously misplaced? Death is different from life, and if we are attached to the latter then it is reasonable for us to fear the former, in just the same way that I am different from other people and if I acknowledge this difference then I am just referring to something that is real and forms part of our awareness of the world.

As we know, there are arguments to the contrary made by Buddhists and others, and this is not the place to examine those arguments' validity, but it is the place to examine how those arguments are supposed to operate. They are supposed to show that a commonplace of our experience is in fact a theory we accept that is based on something false. For example, we do not really experience our individuality as selves, according to Buddhism, we think we are different from everyone else and that is a hypothesis on the basis of which we operate but it does not have evidence as its basis. There is no individual self that we can know and use as an example of who we really are and how distinct that being is, and so our belief is based on an idea without anything tangible behind it. Whether that argument works is not relevant to the discussion here, only its form is important. Its form is the

idea that the self is a false enemy of the other, and our language misleads us here, much in the same way that it does when it is a matter of false friends. In the latter case there are phonetic similarities between unrelated terms, in the former case there are apparent differences between terms which are really linked semantically.

A good example of this sort of issue arises when considering what might be called the appropriate attitude to death. Most people are frightened of dying, since they enjoy being alive and are loathe to replace it with what looks like something incompatible with life. Even those who anticipate a life after death might wonder if their beliefs are justified and not wish to risk what they know and like about being alive now with what might transpire at some stage of the future. Few things look more opposed to each other than life and death. On the other hand, although there are clear criteria of when someone is obviously dead, there are equally unclear indications and a good deal of controversy over what counts as a good definition of death. Someone may be legally dead but seem to others still to be alive, they may look and behave as if they have some of the functions of life such as reaction to their surroundings, breathing, heart movement and so on. The fact that there are clear cases does not mean that all cases of death are clear and this may throw doubt in our very basic distinction between life and death. The fact that there are a variety of such phenomena here is reflected in the ability that patients and their carers have to make decisions about resuscitation, which to a degree are based on ideas of what sort of existence is worth having and how critical it is to avoid death at all costs. It is not difficult to see why some people would not want to continue living in certain circumstances, and then death comes to be seen to be in our interests. Yet we are used to the idea that life is something that we inevitably value and seek to preserve, and death is to be feared and reviled. This is an illusion constructed on the edifice of false enemies.

III. ENEMIES IN PHILOSOPHY

The notion of false enemies is quite a happy one since we are familiar with the idea that in conditions of conflict often people who would otherwise get on well together somehow find themselves at daggers drawn. When violence breaks out the results can be tragic and yet the events may start very innocuously. Perhaps people have been drinking and then an

argument breaks out and the situation becomes aggravated. The availability of weapons of course magnifies the gravity of the situation. Or perhaps one person makes an offensive remark to someone else, not really out of strong antipathy but due to carelessness or ignorance, and then the whole confrontation becomes serious and ends up with death and injury. It is not surprising perhaps that Buddhism which is so opposed to dichotomies is also very much opposed to violence. It is a system of thought that rejects the idea that we can ever justify violence, and also that we can ever be kind enough to others. This sounds like a pious wish that can never play a role in human conduct since it so unrealistic and utopian, and perhaps from the point of view of how we are likely to behave this is true. Yet the wish is not pious, it is not an attempt at getting people to do something which is far beyond their capabilities. It does not rely on people feeling charitable or kind. The basic fact here is supposed to be that there is no self and so no need to preserve the autonomy of the self, or its property. Violence is an obstacle to the sort of spiritual growth that eventually leads to enlightenment, so that should be eschewed. Normally when we talk about false enemies we have the idea that there is the assumption of basic differences between people but when we look more closely we see that they are more similar than we originally thought. Here though the whole idea of differences is regarded as problematic since although there are certainly different bodies, those bodies do not represent the containers of different selves, so they do not really have different interests. Buddhists see the wood not the trees. The wood of course consists of trees, but the wellbeing of the former is not that closely linked with the wellbeing of all of the latter.

How if at all does language contribute to the idea of false enemies? We should learn here from the example of false friends, many of which stem from the idea that when words look or sound similar, they are. With false enemies we might suggest that when terms look as though they contrast with each other then they do. For those who are skeptical of language this is its capital error, we think that words have essences and that those are real. They actually define something serious in the external world. Buddhism tends to be nominalist, unsurprisingly given its suspicion of essences. On the other hand, nominalism itself might be regarded as an essence. This is one of the familiar problems in philosophy of self-referentiality. To be skeptical of language you need to use language. We are used to the idea in

philosophy that language can be misleading and we need to look beyond it if we are to resolve theoretical issues. This is where false enemies come into their own, since they support the idea of the reality of distinctions which exist in language but perhaps are not real at all. There are a lot of debates in philosophy of course which argue that things that look similar are in fact not, and vice versa. What makes the concept of the false enemy useful is the idea that language systematically confuses us here, and we need to be alert to this phenomenon, otherwise we are likely to go awry. This is hardly a novel proposition, philosophers have been complaining about language for as long as there has been philosophy. Sometimes they have called for an improved formal language in which analytical work can take place, sometimes they have harked back to an earlier time when language was purer, and sometimes they have seen their role as that of tidying up language so that it is easier to see what is going on and use it to help in this process. What is worth pointing to here is the way in which analysis seems to be about dividing things up much in the way that language suggests we should do. The false friend suggests that we link things in certain ways based on resemblances between words.

Take the ideas of being cheerful and reflecting on the death of someone close to you. They look like false enemies to those who argue that death is not something that ought to depress us. We often think of death as something going wrong, and so we should be upset by it, and we think of the absence of someone we are fond of as unpleasant and so to be mourned. What is wrong with that? Those who argue that there is nothing sad about death would see the view they are countering as a reflection of what they might call lazy thinking. Language leads us awry here and it is a commonplace among philosophers that language is often the source of problems. We should go beyond this idea though and ask how this came about. On this issue there is a surprising confluence of views in many philosophical systems that while originally everything was clear, over time things got confused. In the Bible there is the story of the Tower of Babel, in Plato there is the idea that knowledge is the recollection of what we knew in an earlier form of existence, in Judaism and Islam there is the idea that an angel participates in the creation of the child while in utero and teaches it everything, only to make it forget as it is born. Both the Qur'an and the Bible talk about people forgetting God and their duties and how important

the role of prophets and messengers is since they remind us of the role that God plays in our lives and what our corresponding responsibilities to Him are. The Qur'an calls itself a reminder (15: 9 and in many other places).

IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FORGETTING

This idea that we tend to forget important things is not just a religious one, of course. It is there in Plato and also in Confucius, one of whose main ideas was the importance of the rectification of names. He meant by this returning to the earlier clarity with which language was used and which in modern (i.e. his) times was long gone. When everyone knows how words are to be used then the state is well organized and everyone knows what is going on. Hierarchy is crucial for Confucius and society should be structured in a precise way, just as classical grammar is structured. The idea of a perfect logical language lying beneath conventional language has persisted in philosophy, and it is part of that idea of a primordial clarity that is forgotten at some later stage. The use of the idea of forgetting is perhaps a bit strange here since we tend to think of forgetting as a rather mild deficiency, as when we forget an appointment or to brush our teeth. When we forget God then that seems rather serious, and indeed we are told that the consequences are significant. In the Qur'an we told that if we forget Him He will forget us when we are about to enter the fire! But actually it is a very appropriate expression because of its casualness. Our minds do tend to drift and we are often vague about things, even important things, we lack focus and then all sorts of thinking becomes possible and all sorts of ideas become plausible. Not necessarily ideas that are in any way accurate or helpful.

There is an interesting debate in Buddhism about how to reach enlightenment. Some suggest that it is a long and gradual process, and what is required is deep study, careful preparation and skillful guidance. Others take the more Zen approach that it can be a sudden experience or dramatic *bouleversement* which immediately makes us understand how things really are. This seems to base the process on knowledge, but actually the knowledge comes at the end and is often linked with an experience, some apparently simple and direct. On the gradual path knowledge is an important part of the whole approach, and it is a bit like most of the accounts in mysticism about how to come close to God. One has a guide,

one participates in various rituals and in the end as al-Ghazali puts it, the supplicant approaches the door but it is for God to actually decide to open it for him or otherwise. Sufism talks in terms of a series of stations, and one is supposed to move from one to the next, until finally one gets close to the end. The gradual approach works well with traditional religion since it is based on respect for authority, the idea of guidance and obedience, and the study of texts. The sudden approach is also something for which there are guides, but the whole process is much more anarchic and difficult to forecast, since it is more about the final product than it is about the process. Both approaches refer to the costs of forgetting and the need to become aware again of what was lost, probably inadvertently, in the past.

V. THE ROLE OF MORALITY

One of the things that religions make clear is that there is a moral dimension to forgetting. There is the sort of forgetting where something just skips your mind, and this could be due to some perfectly acceptable reason, like a crisis or a medical condition. There can be severe consequences for such forgetting as in the poem by Stesichorus of Himyra:

So once, when Tundaerus
Made sacrifices to all the gods, he forgot one only, the giver of blessings
Aphrodite

and this came to have a significant impact on the wellbeing of his daughters and their marriages (Lattimore, 1970: 34).

There was a kind of forgetting in Germany and other places after World War Two, when it was convenient to forget what had happened, or even whose house or apartment one was now living in.

There is also the type of forgetting where someone does not acknowledge the moral demands on him to remember something important, something which is far from minor, and when it comes to language this can mean where someone does not examine critically the sorts of connections that words appear to indicate. When it comes to false friends we just casually link sounds and words without examining them closely to enough to see if they are really connected. With false enemies the opposite is the case, we assume that concepts that initially look very distinct really are. We have many examples of this, and they lie at the bedrock of much philosophy.

We could include apparently enduring oppositions such as good and evil, opening and closure, unity and diversity, civilization and barbarity, progress and decadence, and secularism and religion. No attempt has been made here to argue that any of these apparent dichotomies are not really dichotomies, the argument has been that we need to examine the connection between these terms carefully before we just conclude they are so distinct. We started by looking at how connections work in language and end up with a moral point, that being clear about language is a moral requirement. Levinas is a thinker who saw clearly the scope for morality and language to work together and separately, although he would probably think that the emphasis on the importance of clarity here is too restrictive for what he had in mind. His point though that at the base of everything lies morality is well taken. The moral is that the apparently clear distinctions which we often draw when we compare and contrast in philosophy are often based on what have been called here false enemies and like all enemies these are worth avoiding.

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