

Lectures in Philosophy, Fudan University, September 2013

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Proposals

1. What does it mean to say 'God exists'? A Philosopher of Language looks at Religion.

Abstract: In the Christian context, many philosophical discussions about the value of Religion start with the question whether God exists. To the participants of such discussions it seems that *this* is the question that has to be answered first, and only when it is answered positively can any follow-up questions be meaningfully treated. In the negative case, no further inquiries are necessary; the whole topic appears to be illusory. (Cf. the popular book 'The God Delusion' by Richard Dawkins)

The lecture will explore what happens when this procedure is reversed: The problem of God's existence is placed at the end rather than at the beginning of a clarification process, that (following William James) starts with certain (possibly universal) human experiences. According to such a view, the linguistic articulation of such experiences is the second step, and only in the context of such articulations (in a third step) in some religions the talk about the 'existence of God' gets a clear meaning.

2. Wittgenstein's later theory of meaning and the special role it assigns to metaphor.

Abstract: In the current discussion about the later Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language we can make out roughly two camps. Most of those who are sympathetic to modern logic and structural linguistics tend to find nothing in his later work that could matter for their own interests. Others who are more interested in the history of language and literature treasure some isolated insights of his on culture and value, and are even glad that this author seems to have given up his earlier aspirations to a more systematic way of thinking about language.

The lecture will show that the later Wittgenstein does offer a detailed and comprehensive account of language meaning that is not at all trivial. In this sense his work does contain a 'theory of meaning' although the shape it takes is not of the axiomatic-deductive type, as philosophers like Michael Dummett had hoped for when they proposed to follow Gottlob Frege. The lecture will show that the phenomenon of metaphor plays a central role in (on the one hand) setting a limit for such hopes and (on the other) in deepening our understanding of linguistic competence as a human capacity.

3. Frege's idea of a 'concept script', its importance for language processing, and its limits as a model for natural language.

Abstract: In the tradition of Leibniz the German logician Gottlob Frege took important steps towards spelling out in detail what he called a 'concept script', a language that follows in its structure what the laws of logic require. Frege's work together with the work of Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead

constitutes the foundation of all of modern logic and of the influential philosophical school of 'Analytic Philosophy'.

The lecture will discuss the philosophical ideas behind Frege's project and will show why they could appear convincing and promising to many philosophers, and why they indeed had tremendous consequences in language processing, artificial intelligence, and information technology. It will then turn to the field of *natural* languages and will show that 'creativity' as a characteristic of human linguistic competence is not the same as the 'recursiveness' we implement in logical systems.

4. The 'propositional content' of religious articulations and the idea of their 'translation'. A controversy with Jürgen Habermas.

Abstract: In his attempt to accept and spell out valuable aspects of the teachings of the great world religions, Jürgen Habermas has developed and repeatedly defended the idea that these valuable aspects should be seen as semantic content-elements that are couched in symbolic forms that belong to pre-rational cultures. To show their value for him would consequently involve a translation into a different symbol system, a medium that is acceptable not only in religious circles, but in the public sphere, especially in the political controversies taking place in enlightened societies.

The lecture will question the idea that in the field of religion a level of propositional content can be defined and argued about on which identical content-elements of different religions can be semantically equivalent (as the concept of translation requires) and can be assessed from a perspective that is neutral to the religious traditions and their expressive resources. It is argued, however, that the necessity to take cultural differences more seriously than Habermas is willing to do, does neither justify a relativistic position nor should it bring an end to intercultural debates.

5. The many senses of the term 'experience', the dangers of expecting too much from the sciences, and the role of philosophy.

Abstract: It was an important and convincing postulate of the period of Enlightenment that one should trust one's own experience instead of exclusively leaning on the authority of classical books, be they of religious or of worldly character. With the development of modern science and its impressive effects in technology, however, we face the danger to forget that in our own experiences we have a stock of resources that is much richer and more varied than the empirical results of scientific inquiry.

The lecture will examine important differences between kinds of experience (from skills and cases of 'knowing how' to historical, aesthetic, and religious experience) and aims at encouraging people not educated in one of the sciences to trust their own experience. It takes such encouragement as one of the ongoing tasks of philosophy and illustrates this claim with reference to current mind/brain debates.