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FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE says that a word is composed of two parts, a sound-image and a concept: "The linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and an acoustic image." The sound-image signifies the concept: the sound-image is the signifier, the concept is the signified. De Saussure is only one of a large company of thinkers who describe words in this way. Most philosophical and semiotic analyses of words claim that words have two components, a dimension of sounds and a dimension of concepts.

But to look at words this way can be very misleading. It makes us inclined to believe that the concept is something: that there is some sort of entity in our minds, or perhaps in our brains, that we can call the concept. De Saussure himself speaks of concepts as "facts of consciousness" found in our brains. And when we take concepts in this way, we become inclined to consider our minds or even our brains as the kind of thing that contains ideas and concepts. Because of the misleading way in which we have described words, we generate a population of strange entities, and then we construct a place in which they can dwell. We tend to substantialize both concepts and the mind. We may even go on to add a process of ideogenesis, a natural process in which impressions cause images which in turn cause concepts; thus new concepts are said to be brought into being and to take their place in the mind along with those that are there already.

Mental entities, as the significations of our words, have been postulated under many different titles in the history of thought: as

2 Ibid., p. 28
concepts, mental words, interior words, intelligible species, ideas, notions, cognitive contents, and abstract entities. Under these and other names they have been accepted by Neoplatonic philosophers and theologians, by various Scholastics, by Descartes, by the classical British empiricists, Kant and the Neokantians, as well as by many recent thinkers. But other writers have argued against the existence of such mental entities. William of Ockham, for example, in his later philosophy, denied that a concept could exist as something distinct from an act of understanding. Earlier in our century Ryle argued against mental entities, and the general drift of recent theories of meaning and reference has also been negative. But such entities still keep coming back, just as they have throughout the history of Western philosophy; recently John Searle has launched a vigorous counterattack against the critics of mental states and intentional contents. In a chapter entitled, “Are Meanings in the Head?” he claims, “Some form of internalism must be right because there isn’t anything else to do the job. The brain is all we have for the purpose of representing the world to ourselves and everything we can use must be inside the brain.” Searle’s own position is “a kind of biological naturalism,” but he does feel compelled to posit intentional states as the only possible explanation of consciousness, thinking, and language.

It is interesting that the writers who posit concepts do so as a result of argument and because they see no other way of accounting for the way we experience the world. No one directly experiences concepts or abstract entities or ideas. Those who believe in them are backed into accepting such things; they are forced by argument to posit them. And when we do posit concepts, we find that their way of being is troubling and embarrassing. It is not surprising therefore that there have been many arguments against them.

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5 Frege argues strongly against the reduction of thoughts to subjective, mental ideas. His solution is to place them neither among material objects nor among ideas, but in a new realm, and he too posits this domain not because he experiences it but because he is forced by argument to do so: “A third realm must be recognized.” See “The Thought: A Logical Inquiry,” trans. A. M. and Marcelle Quinton, Mind 65 (1956): 302. My chief concern
EXORCISING CONCEPTS

But none of the arguments against the existence of mental conceptual entities will rid us of our tendency to posit such entities until we can get a better analysis of language. We need a positive description of words that is more adequate than the one that leads us down this false trail. Just to argue against the existence of mental entities is like treating the symptoms of an illness without treating the illness itself. The ailment will keep coming back. We remain left with the misunderstanding of words, the inadequate description, the bed of infection that generates the symptoms we chronically suffer from. Until the understanding of words is set right, we will continue to fall back again and again into positing the imaginary mental kingdom with its population of ideas.

Furthermore, we tend to posit ideas and concepts not just because of philosophical confusions, but quite spontaneously under the sway of ordinary language and experience. It seems so plausible to say that our words bring out something that is somehow in us, and that they convey this same curious thing to someone else, to the one who hears and understands what we say; that we then share the idea that was previously possessed by only one of us. Even primitive descriptions of what goes on when we speak appeal to such ideas "in" us, whether in our heads or in our hearts.

I will try to provide a philosophical description of words that will not force us to posit ideas or concepts as mental entities. My approach will expand the number of factors that must be taken into account in a description of what happens when a word exists. My description requires four elements: (1) the speaker; (2) the sound, the phonemic dimension of the word; (3) the thing being named or referred to through the use of the word; (4) someone who hears and understands the word.

The position I argue against would claim that a word can exist when only the first two of these four factors are present, (A) the speaker and (B) the phonemic dimension, and that these two factors require the presence of (C) the mental thing called a concept. The position I argue against would claim that the concept in the speaker's

in this essay is to argue against concepts as mental entities, so I do not discuss Frege's third realm as such; however if I can show that conceptual mental entities need not be posited, I will also have shown that a subsistent third realm need not be posited either. Or, to put it another way, I will have clarified what Frege is getting at when he feels the need to postulate a third realm.
mind is activated—it begins to "glow"—as the word is spoken or imagined. The thing spoken about could be dispensed with; it could be absent, or it could even be non-existent. The interlocutor or listener could also be dispensed with. A word comes into being when someone blends a glowing idea with a phonemic stream. As de Saussure says, "A linguistic entity exists only by the association of the signifier and the signified; once one keeps only one of these elements, the linguistic entity disappears." The sound alone could not make the word; by itself it has no meaning and does not count as a word. The glowing concept alone would not constitute a word either; that would be only wordless thinking, if indeed it could happen at all. But a word does come into being when sound and concept are generated together, and for this to happen, the concept must somehow exist. This is the conclusion I wish to destroy.

II

I maintain that the concept as a mental entity is a transcendental mirage, something analogous to the mirages we occasionally encounter in our experience of things.

In an ordinary, wordly mirage, we think we see something when no such thing is there. What we seem to see appears to us because of the reflection of light waves, a reflection that displaces and distorts the looks of distant objects. One of the causes of our false seeing is the point of view from which we observe; if we were placed elsewhere, the reflection would not strike us the way it does and the distortion would not take place.

A transcendental mirage occurs to us not when we look at objects, but when we try to talk about words and thinking. Here again we think we "see" or must posit something. However that something is not there, at least not as we think we must posit it. And one of the causes of our false positing is the point of view from which we think: it is the position from which we reflect. It is because we want to talk about words and thinking—which are strange things to talk about indeed—and not merely to talk about ordinary objects, that we are subjeected to this mirage. My task is to unravel some

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*Cours de linguistique générale*, p. 144.
of the perspectives at work here, and to show how they bring about
the mirage of entities such as concepts and ideas.

Even an ordinary mirage is not nothing: it is a mirage. A mirage
is not what it seems to be, but that, precisely, is what a mirage is.
Also a mirage is not a dream, it is not a memory, it is not a pine
tree or a beaver. It can be distinguished from other kinds of being.
It is as a mirage. Likewise, the entity called “a concept,” the thing
that we want to show up as a transcendental mirage, is as a mirage,
and there are factors that go into making it to be such. There are
reasons why we are so strongly inclined to posit such a thing. The
mental entity is interesting, philosophically interesting, precisely
in its being a transcendental mirage. I will attempt to demystify
this issue, to exorcise ghosts and show they are only shadows; but
also to show what such shadows are, and why they look like ghosts.
My procedure of demystification will not be all negative, therefore.
In eliminating concepts as mental beings, I will have positive things
to say about the ontology of appearance. And my first step in doing
this is to insist on the four factors I cannot do without: the speaker,
the sound, the thing spoken about, and the hearer.

III

John says “persimmon” and Mary understands what he says.
We want to avoid appealing to concepts as explanations of what
John expresses and Mary understands. How are we to clarify what
is going on?

Mary has been acquainted with persimmons. The sound John
utters makes her think of persimmons. Persimmons become the
target of her attention (whether they are perceptually present or
not). But they become present to her in a special way. They become
present to her as presented by John through what he voices. This
slant is the new and important dimension, and it makes persimmons
into the meaning “persimmon.” Persimmons taken (by Mary) as
presented by John make up the meaning of what John has said. The
only “thing” added to persimmons is their being taken as presented
by the speech of John. This formal dimension is all that is “layered”
onto persimmons. This way of being taken transmutes a persimmon
into a meaning, and it gives a meaning to the words that are voiced.

Thus there is no need to appeal to a concept or idea as a mental
entity, distinct from real persimmons and expressed by the words. A new slant, not a new thing, is all that is added. To postulate a mental entity, a concept or idea, is to undergo a mirage; it is to substantialize a slant or a way of being taken. We do not need such entities; all we need are the verbal sound, the object, the speaker and his achievements, and the interlocutor and her achievements. And underlying all these, of course, is the ability we have to take a presented object as being presented to us by a speaker in the words he voices.

My interpretation brings words and things more closely together (there is no concept mediating between them). My interpretation of meaning seems to paste a meaning right on the thing that is meant, instead of locating it in the mind or in the psyche. My interpretation almost seems to go back to the kind of identification of word and thing that is said to be typical of primitive cultures, in which the name of something or someone is thought to contain the "soul" of what is named. But there may be something to this primitive understanding. We in our sophistication have psychologized the use of words. In a Lockean spirit we have allowed words to range only over the domain of our ideas, and we have tacitly taken ideas to be some sort of internal things. But philosophically this is terribly naive. An idea is not an internal entity and in an important sense it is really not other to the thing of which it is the idea. An idea is a thing presented or understood. Only the slant of being taken as presented or as understood needs to be "added" to a thing to give us the idea of that thing. So a linguistic sound should indeed be blended more closely with that which it presents. The sound is the vehicle by which the thing is presented and also taken as being presented by the one who makes the sound. The meaning of the sound is the thing, but the thing taken as presented by the speaker. And the word does indeed possess something like the "soul" of the thing: it draws attention to the thing's possibility of presenting itself, of being itself in its many ways of being experienced and understood.

To bring out the peculiarities of words and their meanings, let us contrast them to signs that indicate an object but are not used to mean the object. Suppose that every time I hear tires screech, I think of Avery, who is a terrible driver. Sometimes, indeed, the sound of screeching tires is a sign that Avery is coming. But although this sound indicates Avery to me, it does not have the "meaning" Avery, the way the sound "Avery," or some other name
of the same man, does. The difference lies in this: the indication-sign makes me think of Avery, but not as presented by anyone to anyone. The screeching tires only draw my attention to Avery. But the word “Avery” draws my attention to Avery as being presented to me by whoever voices the word. Another dimension is added in words, one that does not function in indication-signs. The presentational intitiative of the speaker and the presentational achievement of the listener come into play and the thing is presented as presented by someone to someone: the thing becomes a meaning, and the sounds acquire a meaning (whereas the screeching tires, strictly speaking, do not). And once we take an object as being presented by someone to someone, we naturally want to find out how the object is being presented: we go on to hear what the speaker has to say about the thing. But we do not wait to hear what else the screeching tires have to say about what they suggest, because no saying and no meaning is involved in them. Thus an indication-sign just turns us toward an object, while a word turns us toward an object to prepare us for what is to be said about it.

A sign that merely indicates a thing, such as the screeching tires that indicate Avery, brings that thing to mind and then lets go; it simply lets the thing be presented. But a sign that is used to mean a thing brings that thing to mind and then holds on; it lets the thing be presented as presented by the sign and by the one who uses the sign, to the one who “takes up” the sign. Thus the name of a thing does not just present the thing; the name stays around as presenting the thing, and the thing remains suffused as being what the name refers to. The thing and the name belong together in a way in which the thing and its indication-sign do not belong together. And once the thing has been presented by its name, we can go on to inquire how the thing is meant by the use, even by this use, of the word. When we do this, we inquire after the meaning of the word.

IV

My interpretation of meaning has some affinities with the account given by Frege. Frege says that a name has both “sense” and

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7To hear what is said about the thing is to engage the structure Aristotle names in his phrase, ti kata tinos.
“reference,” Sinn and Bedeutung. The names “Morning Star” and “Evening Star” have different senses but the same reference, since they are both used to refer to the same celestial object. Frege defines sense as the “mode of presentation” of the object, the description under which the object is presented, while the referent is the “bare” or “mere” object. In my analysis also a name has both reference and sense: a word turns our attention to an object, but to the object as to be presented in a specific way by the use of this particular term. However there is a difference in the import of Frege’s account and my own. My account tries to show how the very domain of sense is differentiated from the domain of objects. It tries to bring out the various contexts and achievements within which the domain of meaning is established: it brings into play the object, the sound, the speaker and his achievements, the listener and his achievements, and most of all the capacity we have to take an object not just directly but as presented by someone to someone. Frege does distinguish sense from reference, but he does not explore the being of sense and the differentiation of sense from object by the achievements of the speaker and listener. He provides the statics but not the dynamics of sense. Frege takes the difference for granted whereas I wish to treat it as a philosophical issue.

I have limited my description of an act of meaning to a rather simple case, the case of one speaker using a single term to express something to a listener. But the important thing is not whether there are only two conversationalists or many, and it is not whether the meaning stated is simple or complex: the important thing is that a new dimension, a new slant is opened. We have not only things, but things taken as presented by someone to someone. This is the domain of meaning. In this dimension we enjoy great flexibility. There is a wide range of ways in which a thing can be presented by someone to someone. It can be presented in its individuality (Avery) or it can be presented as an instance of a kind (this case of smallpox). The kind itself can be presented (smallpox damages the complexion). And besides changing the formal registers in the ways the thing is presented, the speaker can bring out various features and relations in the object. All these possibilities are not simply psychological.

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permutations of an impression, existing simply in the speaker's mind. They are not simply ways in which we can mean; they are ways in which the object can be presented. They are not merely eccentricities of language, nor merely mental mechanisms or psycholinguistic possibilities. They are ontological. They are ways in which things can become meaningful. They are ways in which things can be presented, and as such they are part of the being of things. One of the most destructive effects of the tendency we have to psychologize or mentalize meanings is the withdrawal of the formal possibilities of presentation from beings and the confinement of these possibilities to our mental and psychological makeup, as though our minds were something else besides the presentation of things.

Furthermore, linguistic grammar and logical syntax do not affect merely our speech and the subjective, psychic arrangements of our ideas. They pattern how things can be presented. In ordering our meanings, we order how things seem to us and how we present them to others, because meanings are precisely things as presented through our syntax we do not merely link a subject-idea with a concept, we do not merely combine mental representations into propositions, making them into complex mental entities. Rather we make moves within the dimension opened up when things are considered as being presented by a speaker to a listener. To say, "Persimmons are sour when they are not ripe," is not to rearrange our mental concepts, but to articulate a small part of the world, to arrange its wholes and parts, its things and aspects, and to present it as so arranged through the words we voice. Syntactical composition is a special kind of achievement made possible in the domain of presentability we call meaning.

And although we have used the simple case of John and Mary speaking to one another, the new slant on things can occur both when a speaker is alone and when the speaker is generalized or depersonalized to such a degree that we reach not John's or Mary's meaning, but "the meaning" that everyone or anyone would have of the object in question: in the case of the anonymous meaning, we still acquire the dimension of meaning by virtue of the object's being taken as presentable to everyone and anyone. The slant does the trick. Even dictionary meanings are how certain things are presentable in a certain language; they are not expressions of possible mental entities. And in the marginal case of the solitary speaker, the speaker, though alone, still introduces the slant of how things
are presentable to himself and how they could be presented, by what he says, to others. There is always some incipient conversation even when we think by ourselves.⁹

V

I have noted that we seem inveterately inclined to think of ideas or concepts as things in the mind. Perhaps we can spell out why we tend toward this psychological interpretation of meaning, why we are inclined to posit concepts as mental entities and the mind as the repository of such entities. One of the reasons is philosophical, perhaps metaphysical. It is the great difficulty we have in coping intellectually with presence and absence. One of the great advantages language gives us is the ability to deal with what is absent: with the future, the past, the distant, even the forgotten, the sought, the misunderstood. We as language-users can react not only to what is immediately before us, but also to what is not there before us. We become involved with the absent through our memory and imagination and through pictures, but certainly language is the primary vehicle by which we deal with what is not there before us; language may even be the dimension that permits the specifically human forms of remembering, imagining, and picturing. And when we deal with the absent, we do become cognitively involved with what is away from us. If I tell you about a meeting I had yesterday, or about a building that is a thousand miles distant, you and I are truly concerned with that meeting or that building; I present that object in its absence, and even as absent: as “yesterday” or as “far away.”

Now we seem to resist the view that we truly deal with the absent. We seem desperately to want something “here” as the true target of our discourse. So we posit ideas, concepts, mental contents, perhaps even images or “mental pictures” as what we are truly concerned with. But in fact we do deal with the absent; we present and intend what is past or distant. Meaning also functions in such intending of the absent; in fact most of our speech and meaning is about what is absent. And when I speak about the absent building and you listen and understand, you can take that absent building

⁹ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IV, 4, 1006a21, b7–9
and what I say about it as being presented by me. *That* is the meaning of my words: the absent building being taken as presented to you by me in the words that I voice and you hear. The meaning is not something here in my mind as a psychological concept; it is not a substitute for the building that is not there before us. It is what I am stating. It is a small part of the world, an absent part, one being taken as presented by me to you in the sounds I make.

The existence of false statements and of statements that are mistaken in their reference is another reason why we are inclined to posit mental entities as the meanings of such statements. There may be nothing, or there may be something else, “out there,” but, in this mistaken interpretation, the concepts are said to exist “in here” and their falsity or failure of reference is said to consist in their somehow not matching what is “out there.” How does my interpretation, which seems to locate meanings in the presentabilities of things, account for falsity and reference-failure? Would my interpretation not make falsity and failure of reference impossible?

It would not. The fact is that things can be presented as other than they are. Presentability is such as to allow false appearances. This happens even in ordinary perception when, for example, a bush looks like and is taken as a man, or a piece of ice looks like and is taken as a piece of glass. It happens even more intensely when we deal not with simple perceptions but with the way things can be presented—usually in their absence—in words. Anger, for example, may be talked about as hatred, or friendship can be talked about as exploitation. The thing presents itself in speech as other than it truly is, and the speaker who presents it in this way is false in what he says. Even a failure of reference—as when I talk about Peter’s second sister (he has only one)—is an attempt on my part to present a small part of the world; it is not a failure of something in my head to be correlated to anything in the world. My attempt to identify fails, but I am still engaged in processing the world, and my meanings are how I try to present the way things are.

Yet another reason why we are inclined to posit ideas and concepts as mental things is the fact that this domain seems to subsist apart from our voluntary control. As long as we are talking, there seem to be ideas around; these ideas seem to surface, to begin glowing, even before we talk: they seem to be what stimulates us to speak. But we do not need to substantialize ideas and concepts to account for the phenomenon at work here. We are constituted as
human beings and as speakers not by the emergence of mental entities, but by our persistent ability to take what we experience as presented by, or as presentable to, someone in speech. It is this ability, and its almost perpetual activation on the border of all our experience, that allows us to deal not only with things, but with things as stated or as stateable, that is, with meanings. As users of language we are always incipiently reflective. Indeed it is this sensitivity to things as presentable that opens the possibility of speech to us: it is not simply the learning of words and grammar. Words and grammar rush in to fill the space opened by this new slant on things. Without the slant, the composition of words would be only a game.

Once we have the ability to shift from things to things as presented in speech, we can exercise it in various ways. Sometimes we may do so in serious work, as we try to verify whether what is said is true or not: we experience things in order to confirm or disconfirm the way they have been presented by someone, the way someone said they were. But we can also just flick from one to the other, from thing to meaning and back, for the sheer enjoyment of it. We can simply delight in the difference between thing and meaning. We can, for example, think of eating, and think of eating as presented by John Jones, and think of eating as presented in Italian, French, German, and English, for the nuances of meaning it can have in these languages. It is only because eating is somehow the same and yet differently presented that, say, a French comedian can make jokes about British cuisine. And if we extend the scope of our enjoyable shifts to cover even the voiced sound, we can delight in puns, double-entendres, insightful metaphors, and amusing incoherences, as when Mr. Rude is put in charge of hospitality, or when we meet a plumber named Flood, or when a man named Forget edits a book on hermeneutics. In such cases we sink down into the word itself and we stir up the other meanings it carries, the other presentations of which it is the vehicle. We allow these other senses to be played off against the one we are engaged in now, and thus allow things (as presented) to be compared and contrasted with one another in an enormous variety of ways. We can be far more clever in speech than we can be in simple mimicry or imitation.

But when we move from thing to meaning to word, whether in

\[\footnote{Philippe Forget, ed., Text und Interpretation (Munich: Fink, 1984)}\]
work or at play, we do not turn from that thing there (an object) to this thing here (a mental entity) to still another thing coming forth (a word); we simply shift our attitude and go from the thing to the thing as presented to the thing as presented and as voiced. And concepts as mental entities, the transcendental mirage that occurs so persistently, are simply reified or decontextualized meanings. They are modes of presentation that have mistakenly been taken as mental things.

I have, in other places, claimed that philosophy is the analysis of the forms of presentation, the description of the ways in which things can be presented. The philosophical reflection that issues in such analysis is not, of course, the same as the kind of reflection we are discussing in this paper, the kind that establishes human existence in language. But unless there were the reflection that opens the possibility of meaning, there could not be any philosophical reflection either. Philosophical thinking brings to a new level the distancing to experience that is begun in all human speech.

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