Gregory Bateson: Epistemology, Language, Play and the Double Bind

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Let us begin epistemology where Bateson does, with the metaphor of binocular vision. He points out the fact that, because the two eyes have *different* perspectives on the world, the brain is enabled to construct a stereoscopic guide to the three-dimensional world before us (Bateson, 1978: 79-81). To judge distance and shape with the aid of one eye alone leaves us only with parallax effects, perspectival convergences and textural shrinkings with distance, the fading of colours in a landscape through the dust and vapour in the air, none of which produce the sensory *depth* that characterizes the stereoscopic experience. You cannot play tennis successfully if you have one eye covered. Two views of "the same" region outside us give us a better grasp on the real. There is nothing to be gained by overlaying a view of the world with the very same view. If "two descriptions are better than one," there must be some kind of mismatch between them (Bateson, 1980: 150). Indeed, it is misleading to believe that the communication of knowledge performs nothing more than a tautologous demonstration of what is already known, a kind of McChoakumchild delivery of fact from the knowledgeable to the ignorant.

Bateson gave a special meaning to the logical notion of tautology. The mathematical definition, as Bateson himself gives it: "[Tautology] springs from a set cluster of arbitrary axioms or definitions and *no "new" information may be added* to that cluster after the assertion of axioms" (Bateson, 1980: 236; his emphasis). What his investigations into evolutionary theory led to was the conviction that "information" in the proper sense of the term produced an *updating* of existing behaviours, and that the changes this implies arise from the interaction of *two* separate processes, that of the chance mutation of the genetic inheritance and that of the draconian filter of the challenging and possibly lethal contingencies of creaturely existence. There could not be a "tautology" of creaturely reaction across a species and beyond, for both creature and species would be condemned to extinction if they were unable to change responses when the environment changes. The "steady state" of survival over generations is only possible if such adjustments are allowed for (1980: 234), and they involve *random* changes within both processes, two stochastic modes. "Stochastic" as a word derives from a Greek word the metaphor of which is an "aiming at a mark," and, as all archers know, however skilled, there is always a random element in what they do. What results is "a zigzag ladder of dialectic between form and process" (ibid.: 210). To rigidify responses into one unchanging tautologous system,

whatever rigorousness and "certainty" it may claim, is a recipe for a self-defeating disaster. "Every action of the living creature involves some trial and error, and for any trial to be new, it must be random" (1980: 202). On the contrary, as he put it, the tautologous ecological system has to be "torn"; to underscore this, Bateson quotes the lines from Tennyson's "Morte D"Arthur" (Bateson,1980; 223):

The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.And elsewhere we find him saying, "I once heard a Zen master state categorically: "To become accustomed to anything is a terrible thing" (1978: 215). One is reminded of the key line of the insistent little poem by Laurence Binyon, that repeatedly asks the question "Why do I not grow used?" (the "used" pronounced with an "s" sound, not a "z").

Bateson turned to Gustav Jung for a useful distinction, that between the "pleroma" and the "creatura." Jung defines the pleroma as "the world in which events are caused by forces and impacts and in which there are no 'distinctions'": in the creatura, "effects are brought about precisely by difference" (Jung, 1961; Bateson, 1978: 430). One can say that it corresponds to the more familiar distinction between inanimate and animate, but his use of the criterion of difference as against absence of it requires some clarification. After all, one can point to many "differences" within the inanimate, for example, in mass differences between two planets that produce their gravitational effects upon each other—are not the tides a continuous proof of such difference?

What Jung and, hence, Bateson are drawing attention to, however, is the fact that creatures have the power of *differentiating* elements in their environment in the service of the maintenance of life and the reproduction of their species, and, furthermore, in that same service are, in varying degrees, capable of consequently *changing* the character of that differentiation by trial and error. Obviously the inanimate Real goes its own way without any such organization of the flow of events, without any such distinctions acted upon to satisfy desires and to escape from fears.

It is here that an epistemological claim now being made within the philosophy of perception becomes relevant. However tempted we may be into thinking that what comes to our sensory organs is already neatly parcelled into those "recognizable" units we call "things," "persons," and even "selves," the input from the real is in no way named, in no way conveniently sorted for us. Things do not come to us already labelled. It is not the case that, to take visual experience alone, that we are already provided with a rigorous counting of entities from the field of colour and form. Certainly the colours and forms can provide us with *evidence* which we can interpret in various ways, and it is undeniable that such interpretations differ from creature to creature. No animal's eyes are sensitive to precisely the same range of light-waves as another, and there are marked differences from species to

species; the pigeon, for example, has four types of cone where we have three, and so may respond with a colour that is outside the ability of our visual cortex to produce. Consider, too, the perspectival and often fragmentary nature of our percepts: I can say now that I see "a tree" before me, but its lower trunk is concealed from me, and am I clearly distinguishing its branches and leaves from those of the tree behind it?—all this while the autumn wind is blowing leaves away? Tomasello asks us to contrast the perceptions of a painter and a climber both looking at a mountain: it does not occur to him that the sensory and perceptual selections from the real made by the two would be markedly different (Tomasello 2003, 69)—so where is the "same mountain" outside their convenient mutual assumption?

As regards the supposed certainty of mutual counting of "singularities," consider this exchange between two bird-watchers engaged in recording numbers of birds:

> A: That bird you just counted.

> B: Well, what about it?

> A: It was two-and-a-bit leaves.

The "binocular," "dialectical" advantage of two heads being better than one is well demonstrated by this little scene. Notice that it could not have taken place had the sensory input arrived already marked with "objective fact." Sensory experience is like the evidence a detective works with: in fact, one could say that it itself is an example of the sensory experience with which we all have to work. What is merely a depression in the ground to Dr. Watson, if he notices it at all, is a sign to Sherlock Holmes that a woman with a limp who has recently purchased her shoes at Harrod's has passed that way.

The philosopher, therefore, calls sensory experience "non-epistemic," that is, containing no knowledge in itself (see Wright, (ed.), "Introduction," 2008). Other names for it have been "raw-feel," "anoetic" (Greek: *no mind*), and "non-doxastic" (Greek: *no notion*). Only a process of trial and error guided by the motivations of pain and pleasure can enable the brain to project "thinghood" on the chaos of sensation. To revert to Batesonian terms, one can say that the flux of experience, and ultimately the inputs from the Real that excite it for all our senses, are analogue in nature, whereas the imposition of entityhood by human beings is digital. Bateson actually says, "We are looking for a binary division of thought process that will be stochastic in both of its halves, but the halves will differ in that the random component of one half will be digital and the random component of the other will be analogic" (Bateson, 1979: 200). That the brain does have some low-level automatic systems that make edges more obvious and colours more contrasting does not guarantee safe action; indeed, such automatism in some circumstances could lead to fatal evolutionary consequences. As Bateson insists, it is flexibility that protects both creature and species when the environment turns unpredictable as far as past "custom" is concerned. This is why learning can take place. This is not to deny that many animals have instinctive perceptual

responses built in; even a human infant responds automatically to the nipple, but the real evolutionary advantage lies in being able to tune one's percepts to changing situations. That the sensory is no more than interpretable evidence is therefore a significant advantage to the creature, the prime reason being that its perceptions are not merely passive responses to supposedly given entities in the array of light and sound and feel and smell, but always-tentative guides that can be re-directed as a result of the new setback—or new boost—from the environment. What characterizes the evolutionary process is the flexibility that subjects a so far successful rigidification of response to a transformation. As another writer on play, Brian Sutton-Smith, puts it while defining play, "Biologically, its function is to reinforce the organism's variability in the face of rigidifications of successful adaptation" (Sutton-Smith, 1997, 231).

This flexibility suddenly widened in scope and subtlety when language evolved. Prior to that moment, animal signals were limited in their effects. One bird's leap in fear from the ground could be the release of the same act from its fellows in the flock; a stag's bellow could be a warning or challenge to other males; the howling of a pack of wolves could stand for possession of territory; a cub's mewling could alert its mother to its protection; and the like. In all of these, the survival of species and/or creature is rendered the surer by a sequence of behaviour that has proved adaptive in the past. There is no possibility of its being altered in its significance by creatures acting in concert; the flexibility has a definite limit. What is plain is that a sign system evolved for one species of animal that allowed a system of symbols to emerge that achieved an unprecedented flexibility, and, further, by Bateson's own principle, at once effected a liberation of co-operative action that could not but enhance the evolutionary process—although its not guaranteeing any moral *progress* is a matter to which we shall return (for a full-scale philosophical underpinning of the epistemological argument so far, see Wright, 2005: Chs. 3 and 4).

Now we have reached a critical moment in this assessment of Bateson's thought, for we have now reached the topic of language. According to his approach as we have seen so far, something "binocular" should be integral to it. As he says, "It would be bad natural history to expect mental processes and communicative habits of mammals to conform to the logician's ideal" (Bateson, 1976: 121).

"The logician's ideal" is, of course, tautology, the state of universal certainty and coherence in his current logical system, there being a deductive link between all its propositions and the axioms from which it springs. So, although we may hope that the meaning of all the words in the dictionary, and of any others that speakers make up on the spur of the moment, will remain forever securely fixed in their transfer from person to person, such an ideal, if Bateson is right, hardly belongs to an evolutionary strategy worthy of the name. Recall that he said that, with a tautology, "no new information can be added." It is patent that we each of us do not understand a word in the same way. Speaking is essentially a co-operative venture, a view underscored by his assertion that "'survival' is not a matter of the skin as

boundary" (Bateson, 1980: 435). It is here that we must bring together three strands of his thought, ones that he himself did not thoroughly entwine, those of language, play and the Double Bind.

Let us go directly to his definition of play. It is characterized, he says, by the addition of a meta-communicative act, one that stands outside the current level of communication and comments upon it, certainly a "binocular" structure: "These actions, in which we now engage, do not denote what would be denoted by these actions which these actions denote. The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite" (Bateson, 1976: 121).

Bateson immediately draws attention to the fact that play is paradoxical, indicated in his very definition since the word "denote" is used at two levels of abstraction: with two monkeys at play, the action of a nip indicates aggressive attack, but the grin which preceded it denotes that that lower-level denotation does not apply in this instance. This results in two peculiarities of play: "(a) that the messages or signals exchanged in play are in a certain sense untrue or not meant; and (b) that that which is denoted by these signals is non-existent" (Bateson, 1976: 123). A denotation before accepted within an existing communication scheme is subverted by an act of meta-communication which (temporarily) cancels that original scheme.

Bateson notes that play can sometimes fail because the clue to the meta-communication (in the above case, the playful grin) is not observed, or, for some other reason, is disregarded or deliberately ignored. He mentions a ritual common in the Andaman Islands in which leaders of warring tribes meeting in a peace parley were ceremonially allowed "to go through the motions," as we say, of striking each other: there were occasions on which the meta-communicative aspect failed and the blow was responded to on the lower level, so that actual fighting broke out (ibid.: 122). One recalls the white man in America's South who, during a performance of Shakespeare's *Othello*, rushed up out of the audience onto the stage to stop the black actor suffocating the white actress taking the part of Desdemona. There are occasions when student "initiation ceremonies" take a sadistic turn. There are many people who, for unconscious reasons, are quite unable to act a part upon the stage, or even to adopt a change of voice to improve a joke. While watching a 3-D film, we might not be able to resist ducking as a spear is thrown at the camera. The gap between the two levels of communication and meta-communication is fraught with tension, and there is a reason for this, to which we shall return.

But what has this to do with actual language? A first answer might be to point to the structure of jokes, riddles and conundrums, for there we find a deliberate shifting of meaning as a result of contesting clues from the context. To take the simplest of examples, drawn from a child's book of jokes:

PATIENT: Doctor, doctor, I've lost my memory?

DOCTOR: When did it happen?

PATIENT: When did what happen?

(Ahlberg and Ahlberg, 1982: 90)

The second line is the one where it can be said that "communication" and "meta-communication" turn out to be at odds, and that is the result of a rival clue to its meaning which appears in the third line. The "it" in line 2, as uttered by the doctor is clearly referring for him and, he believes, for his patient, to the loss of memory of which the patient has just informed him. There is no problem with that pronoun from his point of view as the context is precisely what the patient has just said, and it is the *custom* in a conversation to maintain mutual reference to the topic raised; pronouns depend upon the hearer being able to pick up what was referred to earlier—that is how they all work. To quote Bateson, we need "an outer frame to delimit the ground against which the figures are to be perceived" (1976: 127). However, the understanding of the patient has suffered a radical change, so radical that she was unable to keep that topic before her mind. Her very question shows that she is now unable *to share* with him what has to be shared in order for a statement to be made by the speaker and acknowledged by the hearer. She has lost that "outer frame" that was common between them, without which no *sharing* can take place. A question, after all, is a plea to be updated about something, and the practical paradox here is that she it was who proposed the topic in the first place, but has now forgotten what it was.

The core irony arises from the fact that she is questioning him about that pronoun reference; her question is itself the clue to the "meta-communication," the very feature that renders the doctor's question ambiguous, for her forgetfulness over so short a time is the proof of her original claim in the first line. We can do here what children would not, derive a further meta-communication from the sad fact that there actually are persons with severe brain injury who are unable to activate their short-term memory after a disturbingly brief time, a thought which, if too salient for the hearer, could drain the joke of its fun. That we should not wish to be so reminded nevertheless makes plain that the meaning of a statement depends markedly on the frame that the hearer brings to it. Bateson was insistent that feeling could not be detached from meaning, that the supposedly "rational" could easily be subverted by the "irrational" (1978: 111-12).

What is especially relevant here for normal communication outside joke contexts is that precisely the same structure is present. One has to keep in mind both (1) the intent to share understandings of some portion of the Real, and (2) the intent of the speaker to update the hearer, and of the hearer to be so updated. This is where the binocularity of language comes "into *play*," as we unthinkingly put it. The linguist Sir Alan Gardiner was one of the first early critics of Saussure's view of language. Saussure privileged the "synchronic" (Greek

same time) aspect of language, that agreed set of rules that specified the match of word to concept for all participants, the "dictionary-view" in which meanings and words existed as a range of fixed pairs across all speakers, which he called *la langue.* Saussure was well aware that language was subject to change—"diachrony" (Greek *through time*)—evidenced in daily speech, which he called *la parole*, but it seemed obvious to him that communication could not take place unless all participants understood the same by the words they used. He even drew a little diagram in which, for two heads facing each other, he tells us that *the same* concept gets lodged in each head, one concept "corresponding to" the other (Saussure, 1974: 11). He likened this equivalence to the two sides of the same piece of paper (ibid.: 113). Initially, one is tempted to agree, for how could two people communicate if they had *different* understandings of the same word?—wouldn't they be talking past each other? However, Gardiner points out that Saussure is forgetting two vital elements in this structure: (a) that it is actually the case that two persons do have somewhat different understandings of the word, so that they *overlap* and yet remain distinct, with the result that the difference does not necessarily interfere with the communication, but, on the contrary, constitutes the reason for it; and (b) that what is referred to in the Real cannot be exactly the same on every occasion of use (Gardiner, 1932: 81; 1944, 109).

Let us take first (a), the personal differences in understanding, to which attention was drawn above. There are undeniable facts which cannot be ignored. First, each person has different sensory experiences from everyone else. The point need not be laboured: to consider one sense alone, there are marked differences in range and sensitivity of hearing from person to person. Second, each has a different learning history for each word, so that as regards both denotation and connotation, including associations of feeling, there is no pure match of understanding. As George Steiner has cogently argued, we each speak an "idiolect" of the "standard" language; he adds, "[t]here are no facsimiles of sensibility, no twin psyches" (Steiner, 1975: 170). It is not that we are speaking a "private language" so berated by the Wittgensteinians of the last century: we are speaking a private *version* of the public language. Steiner likens it to a form of translation (ibid.: 47). The fact has been scientifically proved by the psycholinguist Ragnar Rommetveit, who demonstrated that two subjects can pick out what they regard as "the same entity" when the experiment revealed that they were using different criteria of categorization (Rommetveit,1974, 29-51).

As regards (b), what is being referred to in the Real, Gardiner has this to say of two French speakers using the word *bœuf*: "The living ox before the two observers makes its own new, if infinitesimal contribution to the *signifié* of *bœuf* " (Gardiner. 1944: 109), the "s*ignifié*" being the concept supposedly "common" to the two observers. So there is "binocularity" on levels (a) and (b), that is, both in the understanding of the two engaged in communication and in what they have "singled" out of the Real for one has to add to Gardiner's formulation that the "infinitesimal contribution" is undeniably *different* for the two observers. But one can still ask "How does the 'tautology' of the public language, Saussure's *la langue*, come into this perspective?"

This is where Bateson's notion of play delivers an explanation, for we have reached a genuine "conundrum" in linguistics and philosophy. It is significant to note that Terrence Deacon in his book *The Symbolic Species* cannot help referring to the problem of the origin of language as a "conundrum" (1997, 23), and later refers to it as "the central *riddle* of the problem of language origins" (ibid., 44; my emphasis). Look back at the child's joke that was analysed above. The joker and the hearer of the joke, according to *la langue*, were both seemingly accepting a "common" meaning for that pronoun "it," but, when the clue to a new frame, a new context of relevance arrived in the third line, one that forced a "meta-communicative" look at what had just been said, its meaning changed and we were left with an ambiguity. Binocularity had produced an updating of a meaning, one that was not present before.

Now what happens in an informative statement is exactly the same. The speaker has a new understanding of a region of the Real that she wishes to propose to the hearer. After all, the aim of speech is to help the hearer to a better view of that region. Bird-watcher A wanted Bird-watcher B to alter the very counting of a "thing," so not even the singularity of some-"thing" can be guaranteed in this world. We are certainly not surrounded by given *Dinge-an-Sich*, "things-as-such," to use Immanuel Kant's phrase (*Critique of Pure Reason*: A29, B45) because we cannot use the word "such" until we have pointed out *a supposed singularity* to someone else. The two engaged in language must begin with the *assumption* that they have picked out exactly the same entity from the Real, same in virtually a timeless sense, in that they are both *taking for granted* that there is *one* entity that pre-exists their attempts to single "it" out, and that, whatever criteria they each may be using, "it" is there as an unchanging "referent" awaiting the joint "reference." After all, if they did not take singularity for granted, they would never be able to get a rough purchase on the real; their differing perspectives could not be drawn into the necessary rough overlap.

One must make an adjustment here to Michael Tomasello's analysis of human dialogue as distinct from animal communication. He sees the essential criterion to be an extension of a situation in which the group are sharing attention; there is a "joint attentional scene," minimally consisting of two agents and something that constitutes the "same entity" for each. Whereas animals are unable to take account of the fact that each has a different perspective, human beings are able to take account of the other's intentional perspective (Tomasello, 2003, 25-8). This is also insisted upon by Eric Gans: there was at the origin of language an essential scene in which a "mimetic crisis" occurred characterized by the *ur-*speaker's realization of her difference of understanding from the other of the common object, which leads to "an internalization of the model's motivation" as they converge on "the object" (Gans 1995, 7). However, neither Tomasello and Gans perceive the implication of their own words, which is that, if each agent has a different perspective on the so-called centre of attention, there is no guarantee whatsoever of the *singularity* of what both have been tempted to call "the same entity."

But Bateson could draw attention to the fact that we have used the phrase "taking for" in our taken-for-granted joint reference, and what does the phrase "to take for" mean? We use it in such sentences as the following:

As she was politely backing out of the room, actually trying to conceal her eagerness to go, she reached out behind her for the door-handle and *took* that of the pantry *for* that of the backdoor, so that she rapidly disappeared in among the tins and bins to the great amusement of everyone there."To take for" means *to accept one thing or person for another*, *to accept a substitute that will do for the time being*. And what is it in our case that is being "accepted as a substitute for the time being"—its being *granted*. And what does "granted" mean?—it means *allowed, permitted, exposed to no expectation of opposition of will and desire from the other*. So "to take for granted" means *to accept an illusion of real agreement as a perfect agreement, an apparent blending of motivation with another as a perfect fusing*. And what is this illusory agreement the illusion of which is to be temporarily ignored?—that a *single* object is before the agents concerned.

So in order to begin an informative statement, speaker and hearer have to enter into a little play sequence: they have to pretend together for the moment that what is denoted by some reference that they are making is exactly the same for both; we might call this the "subject" of their discussion. It is as if to take full advantage of their "binocularity," the differences in their view of the real, they have to pretend that there are no differences, just as the differing perspectives of our two eyes are superimposed into one stereoscopic scene. What Catherine Bates says in her excellent book *Play in a Godless World* as applying to texts, "A text makes a contract between writer and reader who agree for a period to play the same game" (Bates, 1999: 73) can be applied as readily to all statements. Play agreement or no, it is still made with some common *hope* as its basis, one that can be extended to a final goal of happiness for both, even though that is a mere ideal, though it be one that, poetically, and therefore, spiritually, as we say, could inspire them both.

For an example, take the situation where the hearer has asked the speaker "Where is the painting?" Before she receives an answer it can be said that speaker and hearer have entered into the collusion that there is a *singular* portion of the Real that provides exactly the same reference for both of them. It is the same as with the two bird-watchers who had "that bird you just counted" as their subject (even though there was no such bird!). Having established this play agreement with the hearer, the speaker then provides a new frame—we might call it the "predicate"—which updates the understanding of the hearer so that the "referent" is not now understood by the hearer in the same way as before. The speaker replies, "The painting is in the attic." The subject word "painting" does not now "denote what it formerly denoted" for the hearer, because part of the history of that painting now includes for her its being in the attic at a certain time. To object that the painting "itself" is "just the same as it was before" is no more than a declaration of the trust that projected a timeless logical singularity beyond the actual experience of either of the

persons involved as the imaginary focus of their *differing* selections from the Real. Add Gardiner's point, the word-meaning of "painting" has also been subjected to an "infinitesimal" change. When Gans refers to "the object" as a "theme," he should bear in mind that a theme is open to variations. (Gans 1995, 6).

Just as in the joke above, something that was "tautologous" for speaker and hearer, that is, apparently requiring "no new information," is suddenly perceived to have been ambiguous, the additional meaning being that new information. The structure of the Statement, the very core of communication, is therefore precisely that of play as Bateson has defined it. Any statement can thus be said to consist of an imagined tautologous "communication" being changed as a result of a "meta-communication." If the statement is accepted by the hearer, what has happened is what Gardiner said would happen: the language, *la langue*, has been changed. Or one might say that, by means of beginning with a mutually assumed "synchronic" co-ordination in *la langue*, they together, in *la parole*, achieved a "diachronic" advance in the language.[(1)]

It might be said with some justification that the language they began the statement in is not the language they ended it in. This turns speaker and hearer metaphorically into Cretan Liars, for in the Paradox of the Liar,—"'All Cretans are liars,' said the Cretan"—the statement he makes is rendered false by the new frame that enters with the last three words, and so too, as we have seen, with the Statement, which begins with "tautology" as supposedly true and ends with a new frame that alters meaning, supposedly false by the earlier supposition but now accepted as the "true," new tautology. This corresponds to Bateson's remark, quoted earlier, that play always contains something strictly "untrue." It is not that the dictionary meaning remains the same before and after the utterance: it is that, after the utterance, a *new agreement* about what a word means has entered the language. We all alter the dictionary meaning as we speak, even though because the change is most often "infinitesimal," to use Gardiner's word, we do not notice it, particularly as our aim together is to bring the language into closer contact with the ever-changing Real.

Gans is thus correct when he detects within the origin of language a paradoxical element, as the analogy with the Cretan Liar Paradox has just shown. Richard van Oort is also pointing out a similar feature when he prefers with Austin to see language as more performative than constative, that is, strictly propositional, only resolvable as True and False. (van Oort, 1997). One might say that when a speaker updates the hearer to a new selection from the real for the taken-for-granted "common" word, what has happened is significantly like saying "I name this ship *Hermes*." "This ship," in this case, is a new selection from the real to which the word had not before been applied; the speaker has effected a transformation of what was *taken to be* "the same entity." Hence, the speaker has "performed" a speech act that alters a rule which will now become part of the "taken-for-granted" ritual of *la langue*. Van Oort points out that Austin's examples of performatives were all of ritual origin (van Oort 1997, 5).

The patient in the joke above was unable to maintain the initial taking-for-granted because she forgot it. The trick—and, following Bateson—one does mean "trick"—is to play at a *perfect* agreement at the start of the statement so that a *partial* correction of it can go through by the end of it. The trick lies in the fact that we believe that a singular object lies beyond the practical overlap of our purposes with a fuzzy region of the Real, but all that actually exists is the boundaryless, analogic Real on which we have projected an ideal of agreement as upon a logically singular, "objective" digital entity by our mutual collusion (from the Latin for *playing together*). So again, Bateson's dictum that in play what is projected, strictly speaking, "does not exist" applies to the initial move in the Statement, because there are no timeless, logically singular entities in the Real that correspond to that supposedly "perfect agreement." The co-ordination process itself exists; the overlap between our differing selections from the Real exists, even though we cannot gauge the extent and character of that overlap; but the purely objective entity does not exist, being only a kind of fictive catalyst that enables us to focus together on an area of interest to us. *La langue* is a provisional order that we are constantly updating, and Bateson's phrase "a zigzag ladder of dialectic between form and process" best describes its series of changes, the "form" being the Real, the "process" being the continual adjustment of word to changing world. We can also invoke Tomasello's metaphor of "ratcheting" advances in meaning (Tomasello 2003, 69).

Imagine that there are two of, say, our australopithecine forebears hunting deer together, perhaps grasping stones as possible weapons (chimpanzees use sticks as tools without being able to communicate linguistically, so there is nothing to anticipate a human element in that fact). They are still at the animal stage of having no mode of communication other than the type of noises of warning, aggressive threat, sexual challenge, etc. that advanced animals possess, none of which are *symbolic* in the linguistic sense, the response to them being merely instinctive or conditioned.

The following circumstance now comes about: one of them, let us say a female, notices, as we would say, a stag hidden within a bush not far from them, the stag not yet having become aware of them (for her what we call the "stag" may be conceptualized only as *prey* or *food*, the "bush" merely as *plant*). Then she notices that *her male companion does not realise that the animal is hidden there*. She, having been as a child one who was fond of play of every kind (and we know well that animals have the capacity to play), now raises her hands to the sides of her head *in the form of antlers*. This is the necessary "transparency," the Second Clue, which is itself ambiguous, being at once merely open hands by her head and also a stag's antlers. She foregrounds her performance as clearly as she can, perhaps sniffing like a deer, mock-nibbling with her mouth, and twitching her nose to improve the suggestion. This is the sort of thing perhaps she often did as a child in play. She then looks "meaningfully," as we would naturally say, in the direction of the deer. She cannot *point* with her hands for that would be a symbol before symbols had come into existence. If now the male anthropoid tumbles to what is being *said*, and especially if now they make the

attack together and the stag brought down, the first *linguistic* communication has gone through with great success. As Gans correctly insists, there is no necessity that the first statement be phonic in character (Gans 1999, 7). An updating of one agent's mode of attention, and thus, his concept and percept, had been brought about by another agent employing a transparency in a situation where the "speaker" was aware that the "hearer" needed updating about a region of the real. We have to say that the female was certainly *meaning* that a familiar source of food was before them even before her male companion picked up the clue (even though she had no words for *source of food*, or even *stag*, only the concepts of them), so it is strictly possible to mean before a fully functioning language has come into existence.

Now to analyse in detail what has come about. The female realised two things: (1) that a portion of real existence important to their immediate common desires was before them both, which we would describe as a bush containing a stag; and (2) that her companion was *not* aware of the bush/branches/leaves as hiding it. Her looking across in the direction of the bush and stag drew his attention to that portion of existence. The measure of overlap between their perceptions might only be very rough, for she is very conscious that the bush is hiding the stag, seeing the antlers among the branches, but he at first only looks vaguely in that direction, taking in perhaps the grass in front, or some rocks above, or a bird perching on a branch. Perhaps he actually *sees* the antlers *as* branches. However, her performance brings the concept of a stag into his mind; his desire for food is awakened and he now "catches sight," as we unthinkingly say, of the hoofs of the stag under the bush. It may be in the past that this has been his successful way of finding hidden deer, so he looks there out of habit. He now perceives, not only the stag, but the *significance* of his partner's performance: he has reached the state of understanding Gardiner was the first to identify, *the recognition of the other's intention*, even though that could only be partial (Gardiner, 1932: 82). Incidentally, Gardiner arrived at this analysis long before the philosopher Paul Grice, who is usually credited with the insight (Grice 1967). Our male anthropoid advances cautiously with his stone at the ready—she follows likewise, and they bring down their prey. As they dance in delight round their capture, he raises his hands to his ears like antlers and she responds with the same in playful happiness, and the "word" becomes firmly established between them , recalled, and more deeply learned, later in joyful ritual dances. Note that one cannot detach ambiguous "word" from the ambiguous grammatical "statement" in this scenario: grammar and semantics emerge simultaneously—in a social act of *play*.

The gap between the subject-as-"communication" and the predicate-as-"meta-communication" is still "fraught with tension," as we mentioned earlier. The reason is easy to find, for the "taking-for-granted" may not produce a satisfactory outcome for the hearer, in spite of her trust in the speaker. We can now understand what "sharing" actually is; it is an act of trust by two people "playing" together that the updating will be such that the "granting" will not be betrayed by it. If one has granted something, one expects that nothing will transpire that produces dissatisfaction, even suffering, but will further one's hopes and

desires. George Steiner. I believe, is the first to draw attention to the central importance of trust in the statement: "All understanding, and the demonstrative statement of understanding which is translation, starts with an act of trust" (Steiner, 1975: 296). He was referring to translation proper, but we have seen how the word "translation" applies metaphorically to normal communication—from idiolect to idiolect. Since trust—better, faith—is at the heart of communication, it is time to turn for a last insight to Bateson's definition of the Double Bind.

What takes us there is the unfortunate implication here that no amount of "taking-for-granted" can guard against the possibility of speaker and hearer ending up in a tragic confrontation once all consequences come fully into the open, those intended, those unintended, and those *unconsciously* intended. The tension will be all the more extreme if both participants made the error of taking what was an experimental mutual co-ordination of two selections from the Real as an unchallengeable, "objective," *singular* one. This is insidiously easy to do as it seems that (1) what one has "objectified" exists in an impersonally rigid state apart from all human choice, whereas it is the attraction of one's own subjective selection, together with our trust in our partner in dialogue, that bestows this aura of certainty; and (2) the need to imagine that objectivity was the necessary first move in the statement, so how easy to take that mutual *pretence* for independent *fact*.

Bateson has provided a detailed analysis of the Double Bind. Two or more persons are involved in a repeated sequence that results in an experience of intense frustration and inner conflict for the victim, an experience that by virtue of its repetition, becomes traumatic. The victim must have been subject to a "primary negative injunction" in which an act has either been forbidden on pain of punishment, or demanded with an equal threat. The authority-figure is one from whom love and protection is expected, typically a parent (or parents), but also possibly a sibling (or siblings). There then occurs a "secondary injunction," backed up with the same aversive techniques, but this time more subtly presented, through gesture or expression or ambiguous utterances—but, whatever the devious means by which it presents itself, the message is unmistakable, namely, that it is now the converse of the earlier prohibition that is being insisted upon. Perhaps one parent subtly gainsays at a more abstract level what the other demands in a concrete situation. The victim, in addition, by virtue of his or her dependency, is unable to escape from the trap into which the authority has placed them. Once the traumatic pattern has been established over a number of occasions, panic, rage or, at the worst, psychotic episodes may be induced in the victim by any fragment of the sequence (Bateson, 1976b: 6-7).

In what way could this have a structure similar to that of the Statement itself? One can begin with a dictum that expresses an essential element in my own theory of language: "What is implicit for each cannot all be explicit for both" (Wright, 2005; 169). When speaker and hearer join in the game of having "singled" out an entity, be it person, thing or self, from the Real, all that has happened is that they have brought their own individual

selections from the flux that confronts them into, as we saw, some kind of overlap, an overlap only proved by their judgements of success as regards their motivations, their particular desires and fears, those judgements sustained by their faith in each other. It is, however, impossible that all the consequences of the current agreement are salient to both parties, for, as was mentioned above, such consequences can be intended by one without it having become salient to the other. This can easily happen without any deceitfulness on the part of the former. New circumstances, quite unexpected at the time of agreement, may involve commitments that were not openly envisaged. After all, in our illustrative situation there might have been a lion behind the bush holding a stag in its jaws. This is not to mention the possibility of a frankly unintended consequence, the outcome of some contingency that emerges unannounced from the Real. What then are speaker and hearer to do in such circumstances for what is presented is a demand for sacrifice on one side or another or on both sides?

It becomes ethically obvious that the earlier agreement—however much it is backed up by appeal to fine-sounding virtues like "sincerity," "loyalty," "duty," "integrity," "truth" and "obedience"—cannot now be simply judged by that appeal. If the two persons are bound by the bond of love, then sacrifice may become the only right course of action, and it cannot, as simply, be a sacrifice that is a pure self-abnegation. There has to be reckoning what is implied both for oneself and for others in possibly similar positions who are loved and valued. In some cases, since the dilemma arises from the ambiguity of the moral trap, a *comic* resolution is possible, and one person can laugh themselves into abandoning their desires: unfortunately, the ambiguity may go down deeper such that the confrontation has tragic implications. People are not computers: one cannot brainwash them into giving up their inmost fears and desires.

Can one here draw in what Gans has detected at the origin of language, that the ability to symbolize is bound up with an "aborting of the desire to appropriate" whatever it was that aroused desire (Gans, 1995, 2)? To enter into the "taking-for-granted" demands more than a blind trust, for, as we have just seen, there is no guarantee that the other's interpretation will turn out to be the same as one's own. What is required is faith, a faith that is prepared for the confrontation of sharp antagonism with those one loves: love, of course, is bold enough to require sacrifice at such moments. This is not a given, of course: there is no normativity built in to the evolution of language. The individual, created by the faith of those who have spoken throughout history, is still faced with an ethical choice.

The obverse of the readiness to sacrifice goes along with the conviction that the language is in order as it is, in other words, as fixedly understood as consisting of unchangeable meanings fortunately equivalent to one's own interpretation, existing in a world ontologically made up of consolingly secure, countable entities. So to hold to a pure "constative" view of language is revealed as sheer superstition, and, in common with all other superstitions, is timidly unable to countenance the radical risk of faith. The illusion of

linguistic Being plays over real Becoming, an illusion necessarily maintained by faith openly as an illusion, which is how we play if we play properly. The logically-minded cannot play. With Gans we can say that there is an ineradicable "theatrical" element (Gans, 1995, 5).

That this is an uncomfortable conclusion is hard to accept, especially, as we saw above, when the initial entry into the agreement was premised on some utopian hope of a final happiness. If one had made the error of thinking that the beloved other could somehow magically have foreseen all possible consequences, so that her understanding could never diverge from one's own, then her apparently new interpretation of the old agreement may look for all the world like betrayal, deceit, disloyalty, undutifulness, insincerity, duplicity. It is here that Bateson's analysis of the Double Bind comes into play, for he is describing victims who had committed themselves to the supposedly protective authority only to discover that what was promised becomes what is actively denied. Of the schizophrenic who is suffering under a Double Bind he says, "He might, for example, assume that behind every statement there is a concealed meaning which is detrimental to his welfare" (Bateson, 1976b: 10). However, it must be pointed out that it is just as likely that the "concealed meaning," that is, what is implicit for one contributor to the dialogue but not to the other, might provide a much greater *reward* than expected. The unexpected might turn out to enhance one's happiness beyond one's expectations and not diminish it. There is nothing, though, in the structure that favours the happy outcome of the mismatch in understanding over the unhappy one. It looks as if the Statement, the evolutionary advance that turned an animal into a human being, did not deliver along with it any direct moral progress.

It is rather the case that what we are inside is a system in which we have to try to play the Freudian game of "Fort-da." The child Freud describes had invented a game in which he threw a wooden reel attached to a piece of string over the edge of his curtained cot so that it disappeared, shouting "O-o-o-o!" "which was not a mere interjection but represented [as his mother assured Freud] the German word *Fort!* ('Gone!') . . . He then pulled the reel [into] the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful 'Da!' ('There')" (Freud, 1984 [1920]: 284). Freud interprets this as the child reliving and establishing its acceptance of the renunciation of the mother as demanded by her frequent departures from him, the game being a form of "compensation" for the abandonment. Similarly, what is required of us is a continual renewal of hope in the face of a complete absence in the Real of any assured promise of fulfilment. Every statement thus plays the game of "Fort-da."

No wonder fundamentalists of all religions would rather have a spurious guarantee of an assured personal happiness that really awaits them at the end of their lives and at the end of all time. They have not reached the degree of acceptance of the possibility of sacrifice that being in a society necessitates. They do not want to turn the inescapable trust that is necessary to speak at all into a true faith that accepts the radical possibility of the greatest risk. Fundamentalism is therefore at its heart cowardly; hence its empty bluster about courage. Nor can fundamentalists play: for they turn the imagined *supposition* of the ideal

agreement we need to open a statement for evidence of its *actuality*. From the evolutionary point of view, they are rigidified, bound into a self-deluding *superstition*. We owe the emergence of our "individuality" within the game of language to the faith of those who have preceded us, but that faith provides no safe pledge of an unchangeable and eternal personhood, some hallowed, inflexible uniqueness. Those primitive tribes that divinized their ancestors were nearer to understanding the structuring of our existence than ourselves. Our only immortality lies in what we contribute to that faith, both while we remain alive and in the legacy of faith we leave behind us.

Gregory Bateson has thus provided the key to the explanation of the Statement, and hence, of language itself, in his perception that communication relies on the element of play, in both of its two senses, that of *looseness,* as in the play of a key in a lock, the "flexibility" he saw as essential to evolution, and in the sense of a *game,* one in which we have to be ready to perceive unexpected opportunities in what before was rigidified. We must add that, in all games, properly played, the chance of losing is not one by which good players are daunted.

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Notes

1. There is not space here to show how the *real* "subject" and "predicate" of a statement, that is, what was knowingly presupposed by both speaker and hearer to be the same for both, and the portion of the speaker's statement that updates that fictively-mutual

understanding, do not necessarily correspond to the *grammatical* subject and predicate. For a full explanation, see Wright, 2005: 142-7.[(back)](#)