Language in Relation to Essence

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Abstract: That language is transmitted through tradition necessarily limits its ability to define concepts such that they contain all intended instances and exclude all others. In *Negative Dialectics* Theodor Adorno explores how a "changed philosophy" should be aware of its limitations (its transmission through language being one of them) and must give itself to instances rather than concepts. Using Jorge Luís Borges's *Funes the Memorious* and Friedrich Nietzsche's *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* I explore the discrepancies between objects and concepts which try to define them and show how the tensions that arise between the two can themselves be useful in transmitting truth about the essence of concepts.

In his book *Negative Dialectics*, Theodor Adorno hoped to define and practice a philosophical methodology which was aware of its finite capability to describe the infinite. Because the circumstances of our lives are historically contingent, and history only ever chooses one course as its outcome, the field of thoughts that philosophers can have access to is limited at any point in time. Additionally, the fact that we exist historically leads to systems of data transmission which are inherently flawed because history does not allow them to evolve solely through pure thought. This makes it difficult to justify the claim that philosophers can ever hold generalizable truth claims which describe concepts that encapsulate all their intended instances of objects, while also capturing their essence. In this essay, I will explore how language is inherently limited in its ability to capture essence through concepts because of its finite nature.

The finitude of language is caused by a multitude of factors that are inherent to it. For one, language is inextricably linked to tradition. This makes it incredibly fallible to contradiction. Rules created within a tradition need not follow a logical schema because tradition is handed down familiarly, and its rules are not adopted solely on the basis of their adherence to a rational form, but also largely on the basis of interpersonal relationship and the weight they acquire through their particularity and existence through an extended period of time. In his essay “On Tradition”, Ador-

no writes, "Tradition is opposed to rationality, even though the one took shape in the other. Its medium is not consciousness but the pregiven, unreflected and binding existence of social forms – the actuality of the past; unintentionally this notion of binding existence was transmitted to the intellectual/spiritual sphere."[1] Philosophy's dependence on language as a mode of its transmission is one way in which tradition binds intellectual pursuits.

In the same essay, Adorno writes of language, "The value of each and every word, each and every combination of words objectively derives its meaning from its history and this history embraces the historical process as such."[2] That language exists within history, and is thusly largely dependent on it, further points to its limitations. After all, history is the remembrance of one existent outcome, not of all possible past outcomes. This places limitations on language's ability to be rational. Language does not have an infinite sampling of outcomes from which it can choose some most accurate version of itself, which best reflects concepts as they appear in the world. In fact, history forces it to "choose" precisely one outcome at a time. This, again, makes language fallible to internal contradiction and makes it unlikely that any language's schema will accurately reflect the ways in which concepts exist in the world. In this paper, I will explore how language might misrepresent objects and concepts in the world given its existence both within history and tradition.

Since it is the case that language's ability to transmit information is necessarily limited, we are forced to ask how it could possibly be used to accurately represent philosophical truth claims. To explore this question, let us hold that it is one of philosophy's aims to linguistically capture the essence of concepts through statements or sets of statements. Additionally, let us hold that the set of objects that are defined by any concept is the set of instances which are accurately described by the statements that make up a concept. Then, in order to understand the complexities involved in conceptualizing generalizable truth claims, we must first consider the innate philosophical problems that exist when we try to define them. In his chapter "After Auschwitz" in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes, "In philosophy we experience a shock: the deeper, the more rigorous its penetration, the greater our suspicion that philosophy removes us from things as they are—that an unveiling of the essence might enable the most superficial and trivial views to prevail over the views that aim at the essence."[3] If a truth claim is meant to get at the essence of an object, then, per Adorno, we run into problems when we make rigorous, sealed, systematic attempts at defining concepts in order to make our claims. It appears that the essences of objects are always more complex (or more simple, as we shall see later) than philosophy needs them to be. When we make truth claims and later adjust those claims – hoping to keep them generalizable while, in fact, add-

ing neverending levels of complexities to account for counterexamples, forgotten nuances, newly collected data – we come to the realization that we might never achieve the accuracy we would need in order to create an all-encompassing claim.

This is because a tension exists between concepts and the objects they attempt to describe. When we make claims aiming at describing the essence of objects, we set out to classify objects in a way which allows us to make statements that tell us something about what is necessary to their being. However, if everytime we do this we end up piling on corrections after corrections to account for individual instances of objects which contradict our definition for a given concept, the task of philosophy becomes one of bandaging an ever-increasing blood flow of instances. Philosophers are forced to write in a defensive mode where life-preservation (or truth-preservation) drives the task of the acquisition of knowledge. This makes us lose track of the intentions we set when we began classifying objects into concepts in the first place. This metaphor illuminates Adorno's claim that the increased rigor that philosophy has seen as its tradition has continued often leads philosophers to create claims which are coherent and complex, but which lead us astray from the answers they set out to seek in the first place.

As philosophers, then, we might wonder whether the act of making truth claims is innately flawed, or whether we are simply using a mistaken methodology.

Philosophy of language can provide us with perspectives on this question, given that philosophical truth claims must generally fit into a linguistic schema. Written truth claims that aim at the essence of objects are linguistic description of concepts, since concepts are meant to predict and encapsulate objects. However, as Friedrich Nietzsche clearly outlines in his essay "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," all of language is a system of metaphors.[4] The word tree says nothing of the essence of a tree, nor of any tree. Instead, it describes something like the generalizable "treehood" that we perceive all trees to possess. In this way, every word is a descriptor of a concept ("tree" being the label for the concept of "treehood"), which means it describes an infinite amount of more or less related instances of trees which fit the statements that we use to define "treehood". Therefore, per Nietzsche, "Every word immediately becomes a concept, inasmuch as it is not intended to serve as a reminder of the unique and wholly individualized original experience to which it owes its birth, but must at the same time fit innumerable, more or less similar cases—which means, strictly speaking, never equal—in other words, a lot of unequal cases."[5] Not all trees are equal, but we call them all by the same name. Because of the generalization that is a necessary result of linguistically representing truth claims, in philosophy we are often forced to adjust our concepts to make them more precise and rigorous. For example, if I want to make a truth claim about trees'

leaf colors in the fall, I might have to adjust my concept of "treehood" to exclude evergreens, because their leaves do not change colors in the fall in the way that the leaves of most trees do. In doing this, I am decreasing the amount of inequality between the objects that I am referring to (the trees) and their concept ("treehood") because I am limiting the amount of objects that can fit into my concept. This allows me to make a truth claim with regards to the color of leaves on trees in the fall. However, it also distances me from the essence of "treehood" because we create a divide within the concept when we distinguish evergreens from other trees. Originally, I had wanted to define all of these to be trees in the first place. Besides, when I attempt to make truth claims about concepts, I hope to learn something about some Platonic idea I have of them – what Adorno might describe as their essence. Additionally, I want to keep a distance between objects and their concepts (i.e. a concept should encapsulate more than one object). Otherwise concepts lose their generalizability and their claim as holding a universal truth value.

Alternatively, if I believe strongly that evergreens are trees and therefore want the concept of "treehood" to encompass instances of evergreens, I would have to adjust and complexify my truth claim to account for those trees whose leaves do not change color. For example, instead of being able to make a simple statement like "The leaves of trees change color in the

fall," I would have to make a statement like "If a tree is an evergreen, its leaves do not change color in the fall. If a tree is not an evergreen, its leaves do change color in the fall." However, it should be clear that once we begin to allow for these complexities in the truth claims we make, we could easily fall into a regress in which we realize that we are always generalizing too much for each instance of a tree (that the objects we are trying to describe cannot all fit the statement we are making about the concept). This regress could lead us to the conclusion that any claim we make about trees (which refers to the concept of "treehood") is too general and can be countered by some example, until we have a claim for each instance of a tree.

Of course, as we multiply the truth claims we attempt to make about trees, the set of such claims holds more rigorous truth values. That is, each more specified truth claim allows for less counterexamples. Perhaps this regress forces us to conclude that the task of philosophy should be one of perfectly describing instances. However, given the fact that language is a symbolic system which necessarily detaches us from the essence of that which it describes (given, for example, its necessary relation to tradition), we might wonder whether this is even a task worth taking up. Additionally, solely describing objects certainly is not what we hope to do when we make truth claims. It is hardly useful for me to write about the exact time when the leaves of every individual tree in the world change colors. The task of

philosophy, of knowledge, is to find statements that describe concepts, so that we can know something about a multitude of instances (that is, about more than one object).

In the introduction to *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes that, "Traditional philosophy thinks of itself as possessing an infinite object, and in that belief it becomes a finite, conclusive philosophy. A changed philosophy would have to cancel that claim, to cease persuading others and itself that it was the infinite at its disposal."[6] We have already shown that an infinite object can never be equal to a concept. Therefore, from the perspective of philosophy of language, Adorno's statement discards the idea that being infinitely precise about objects is a possibility, given the finite nature of language. However, he does introduce a thought which could serve as a catalyst to the pursuit of such an infinitely precise approach to philosophy when he writes, "If it were delicately understood, the changed philosophy itself would be infinite in the sense of scorning solidification in a body of enumerable theorems. Its substance would lie in the diversity of objects that impinge upon it and of the objects it seeks, a diversity not wrought by any schema; to those objects, philosophy would truly give itself rather than use them as a mirror in which to reread itself, mistaking its own image for concretion."[7] However, Adorno realizes the impossibility of this task, and precisely this realization is what, for him, drives a dialectic between concepts and ob-

jects.

To further explore this impossibility, let us consider *Funes the Memorious* a short story written by Argentine author Jorge Luís Borges which explores the tensions that arise when we hope to make truth claims perfectly exact in order to mitigate the inequality between concepts and objects. The story's narrator tells of a man named Ireneo Funes whose memory becomes infallible after he one day falls off his horse and becomes paralyzed. Borges takes the idea of inerrant memory to its logical extreme; Funes does not forget anything that he perceives. Additionally, "[His] memories were not simple ones; each visual image was linked to muscular sensations, thermal sensations, etc. He could reconstruct all his dreams, all his half-dreams. Two or three times he had reconstructed a whole day. He never hesitated, but each reconstruction had required a whole day."[8] With his memory, Funes takes on certain projects. For example, he invents a system of numbering which goes up to the twenty-four thousand mark, in which each number is called a unique phrase or word. "In place of seven thousand thirteen, he would say (for example) *Máximo Pérez*. [...] In place of five hundred, he would say nine."[9] He does this to avoid the repetition that occurs when we create numbering system on base ten. In his system he could represent the number three hundred sixty-six with a single phrase which would not have to refer to the numbers one hundred or ten to be understood. He never wrote down his num-

bering system because he could perfectly remember it without hesitation, but, as the narrator points out, his project was rather useless. In attempting to be perfectly direct when referencing numbers, Funes makes it impossible to use large numbers at all. It would, after all, take an infinite amount of time and words to name an infinite amount of numbers.

Funes constantly struggles with the idea of perfect precision, since he can remember everything perfectly. "Not only was it difficult for him to comprehend that the generic symbol 'dog' embraces so many unlike individuals of diverse size and form; it bothered him that the dog at three fourteen (seen from the side) should have the same name as the dog at three fifteen (seen from the front)."[10] He finds trouble understanding that a single name can refer to so many different moments in the dog's life. Words (concepts) are never precise enough for him. Borges provides these examples in order to convince us that Funes's thought projects, albeit impressive, are ridiculous. Of course it would be ludicrous to change a dog's name depending on the position from which we view it. The purpose of naming a dog in the first place is, after all, mainly one of practicality. It is simply useful to have a name to reference our pets, just as it is simply useful to have words to reference concepts. If it were at all possible to ever be infinitely specific, then linking every word to a particular object would of course result in a perfectly precise language, but it would also strip that language

of most of its practical purpose.

For these reasons, the narrator suspects that, "[Funes] was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions. In the teeming world of Funes there were only details, almost immediate in their presence."[11] This claim points to the idea that it is impossible to translate the singularity of objects into the universality of concepts. Funes can only think in terms of particular instances, forcing his memory to become somewhat paradoxical. On one hand, he clearly retains much more data and information than any other human. On the other hand, he does this so well that he cannot reserve brain space to process the data, and it becomes useless. His statements become so specified that they only have meaning in relation to themselves, which makes it seem impossible for them to have universal meaning at all. Although he can perfectly recall images and sensations, he has no sense of concepts which could encapsulate them, generalize them, make them noteworthy. Borges is showing us that perfect specificity results in the dissolution of knowledge because it results in the dissolution of a system of concepts which hold meaning by referencing each other, language being one such symbolic system.

Borges's conclusion that knowledge requires generalizability, the blurring of details, the loss of data, can be tied back to Adorno's insistence that rigor in philosophy can force us to lose the essence of concepts and breed superficiality in philosophy. When

Funes wants the dog to have a different name when it is viewed from different angles, he is missing the point of naming the dog in the first place, and he is brushing over the essence of the dog (which is, we like to think, a coherent self that does not change identity from one minute to the next). Funes wants language to be precise, and this results in the two fundamental problems we outlined earlier: First, we do not have the capacity to describe every object with perfect precision and no generalization. Second, and perhaps more significantly, if we could, every statement would be a vacuous one which only retains sense by its own likes.

Nietzsche offers an interesting perspective on why Funes's attempts at salvaging truth by avoiding concepts and speaking only of particulars is fruitless. *In Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* he writes, "We obtain the concept, as we do the form, by overlooking what is individual and actual; whereas nature is acquainted with no forms and no concepts, and likewise with no species, but only with an X which remains inaccessible and undefinable for us."[12] In this view, language is effective at communicating meaning precisely because it creates meaning when it creates concepts. Human cognition is such that it understands form as truth. Per Nietzsche, this is because it understands life-preserving usefulness as truth. "[Man] desires the agreeable life-preserving consequences of truth, but he is indifferent to pure knowledge, which has no consequences."[13] Understanding this quote in conjunction

with the last leads us to conclude that language is reliant on concepts not only because we do not have the time to define every object, but also because truth, by human standards, requires form, which perfectly precise objects in themselves do not have.

To elaborate on the claim above, suppose that I want to make a truth claim about a point on a plane. On this plane there is one triangle and one square, and I have a particular point in mind of which I want to ask whether it is in the triangle or square. One way I could do that is to place a grid over my plane and to use Cartesian points to name the locations of the two shapes and also of the point. In this way I could know where the point lies. This method would be productive and effective. However, if the titular character of *Funes the Memorious* were faced with this question, he would want to refrain from calling the chosen point by its Cartesian coordinates because these reference the grid before they reference the point itself. He would want every point to have its own unique name that is not affected by the others', on the model of his numbering system. The problem with his approach should be clear. If the location of the shapes and the point are not both referencing the grid (or some other intermediary system of representation), then they are only referencing themselves, and the locations of the two cannot be determined in relation to each other. It might be the case that giving the point its own unique name tells us some truth about its existence as an entity (which is,

I think, what Funes was hoping in his pursuit of pure knowledge), but it is in no way helpful in answering our original question which is whether the point lies on the triangle or square.

The example above could illuminate another fundamental tension. If we are not placing objects within concepts, then we have no idea of their location on some predetermined plane of systematic representation. If we admit that truth is really just the singling out of statements in an interconnected web of metaphors as Nietzsche believes, then attempting to make a claim about objects without the use of concepts, gives us no sense of how our claim relates to truth, because our claim would not exist within a web of metaphors which interconnect concepts. However, it is also the case that objects themselves never perfectly exemplify their concepts. Continuing with our previous geometric example, there is nothing about any individual point that distinguishes it from another besides its location, which only exists in reference to other points. That is, the points in the square would be indistinguishable from those in the triangle if they all existed in a vacuum; no point inherently possesses "trianglehood" or "squarehood". In some ways, this fact is worrisome because it means that the identity of points do not indicate the concepts we have used to encapsulate them. How, then, can we justify making generalizations, when, geometrically speaking, points carry no meaning? This is the worry, perhaps, that Funes was hoping

to counteract when he wanted to speak only of points, and stayed unwilling to make the leap from object to concept.

Using these thoughts we will explore another interesting dichotomy. In the tangible world which we have to be yet to be able to perfectly describe or predict through mathematics, we cannot ever refer to exact points, only instances. For example, we can think of a tree as an instance, but not a point. Only in a mathematical paradigm can we talk about an infinitely small point which is indivisible. In other words, every philosophical truth claim which we make on the basis of perception and deduction must, by varying degrees, necessarily be alienated from any infinitely specific object. Nietzsche explores this thought as follows, "The 'thing in itself' (*das Ding an sich*) (for that is what pure truth, without consequences, would be) is quite incomprehensible to the creators of language and not at all worth aiming for. One designates only the relations of things to man, and to express them one calls on the boldest metaphors."[14] Of course, we have no way of knowing whether the "thing in itself" (which perhaps is the essence of objects we hope to get at through the description of concepts) is in fact merely a point, or whether it also only exists relationally. Either way, it remains evident that we cannot know what, if any, ontological relation exists between instances and their concepts.

Once we have established this line of thought,

however, we might see how it provides us with some comfort within the framework of language. Consider trees, for example, which should all more or less unequally fit the concept of "treehood". Trees are not perfectly precise in that they are not points; they could for example, be talked about in terms of their trunks, and branches, and leaves which are, in themselves, concepts. This allows trees to, in some ways, indicate the concept of "treehood". While a point has no element which makes it clear that it is exists as part of square, or triangle, or any other shape, a tree has branches, and maybe we have defined "having branches" as part of the concept of "treehood". In this way, the tree tells us something of "treehood" in a way that a point never could. This means that the word "tree" is not purely self-referential, in the way that any claim we make about a point would have to be. This speaks to Nietzsche's claim that language fabricates its own truth, and also forces us to admit that once we allow for the leap from object to concept, objects have a relation to the concepts which aim at describing them, although this relationship is by no means one of equivalence.

We have now shown that words refer to instances which are not points, and that the instances we describe through language can tell us something about their concepts. We can also consider an opposing outcome of this line of reasoning. Because the instances we hope to refer to through language are not points, we can always make statements about tangible

(non-mathematical) instances which exist outside of, or even contradict, the set of statements that we have created to define their concept. To illustrate this, we can return to the earlier example of the leaves of trees changing colors in the fall. Because the concept of evergreens is composed of its own set of concepts (such as its trunk, leaves, etc.), and many of them overlap with those that we have used to define general "treehood", we can consider evergreens trees even though they might contradict a statement which exists within the concept of "treehood" that says that trees' leaves change colors in the fall. From a purely logical standpoint, this is a contradiction which should force us to either adjust our concept of "treehood" or to adjust our statement about leaves' colors, as we explored at the beginning of this essay.

Hopefully, however, we have shown by now that it is exactly language's lack of precision which allows it to transmit meaning, and we can conclude that contradictions within it are inherent to it and do not deny its ultimate usefulness. Because philosophy is transmitted through language, the contradicting statements Adorno makes about a "changed philosophy" which is guided through the negative dialectic do not discredit his approach to it. He insists that, on the one hand, philosophy should yield to instances because it will never be able to define concepts which describe any instance perfectly truthfully. On the other hand, the definition of concepts is what allows us to talk about the essence

of the instances around us, and, potentially, is what relationally creates truth and meaning in the first place. This, of course, makes all of our truth statements conditional to experience. We are, in this way, never accessing universal truths through concepts. Those two ideas support each other, and thus allow philosophers both a skeptical and a necessary relation to language.

That truth claims are somehow contingent on experience is evident to Adorno. Furthermore, this contingency makes truth claims necessarily historical in their existence. That any historical outcome is necessarily specific makes its structure somehow parallel to that of the development of language. Adorno's insistence that philosophy has to allow for negative dialectics, which are more lenient towards contradiction and tensions between objects and concepts, follows from philosophy's existence as an inherently historical field that is transmitted through a historical medium. For example, he writes in his chapter on "Metaphysics after Auschwitz", "Our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience."[15] Because history chooses a particular course out of many, philosophy's existence within it necessarily limits our potential grasp of universal truth claims. The historicality of thought speaks to the finite nature of its reaches, which forces us, as philosophers, to accept the negative dialectic. The negative dialectic, in turn, asks us to consider tensions and contradictions

as essential to philosophy, and even to truth itself.

On a final note, we might return to Adorno's insistence that philosophy should attempt to get at the essence of the objects around us. This is why, for him, it is worthwhile to generalize in philosophy in the first place. "In philosophy we experience a shock: the deeper, the more rigorous its penetration, the greater our suspicion that philosophy removes us from things as they are — that an unveiling of the essence might enable the most superficial and trivial views to prevail over the views that aim at the essence."[16] This quote, which also appears at the beginning of this paper, exemplifies why philosophy can never "truly give itself" to the diversity of objects, which exist without a schema. What we can make out of this tension is that exceptions will exist contra to any philosophical truth claim we make. Because of the specific and, therefore, limited nature of language and of history, we can never account for all instances when we use concepts. What this means for Adorno is that we should not only allow for the existence of examples which contradict our truth claims; we should examine them closely. Instances which do not perfectly fit our concepts, but which nonetheless carry the essence of the concept, are precisely those which we might have a lot to learn from with regards to what essence is and how it transmits and holds truth.
Ultimately, every philosophical truth claim we make and explore exists within history and is thereby contingent on tradition. That this is the case can be shown

in many ways, but perhaps most simply by the fact that ideas are transmitted through language and language is inextricable from tradition. The linguistic schemas which we use to transmit meaning are never entirely rationally defined, because, definitionally, tradition exists contra to rationality to some non-trivial extent. For Theodor Adorno, this means that any truth claim we make which attempts to say something about a concept's essence will be able to be contradicted or pushed back upon by some object whose essence should fit that of the concept, but whose characteristics somehow differ from the statements we have chosen to define the concept. This should lead us to conclude that we must allow for tensions between concepts and the objects they attempt to contain, and that we may have a lot to learn from the negative dialectic that arises when we allow objects and concepts to both contradict and reference each other.

Notes

1. Theodor Adorno, "On Tradition," Telos 1992, no. 94 (1992): 75.
2. Adorno, “On Tradition,” 78.
3. Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics (Great Britain: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1973), 364.
4. Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” Oregon State University online, http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/Philosophers/Nietzsche/Truth_and_Lie_in_an_Extra-Moral_Sense.htm.
5. Friedrich Nietzsche.
6. Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 13.
7. Ibid, 13.
8. Jorge Luis Borges, "Funes The Memorious," (1964), http://users.clas.ufl.edu/burt/spaceshotsairheads/borges-funes.pdf, 152.
9. Ibid, 152.
10. Ibid, 153.
11. Ibid, 154.
12. Friedrich Nietzsche.
13. Friedrich Nietzsche.
14. Friedrich Nietzsche.
15. Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 362.
16. Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 13.

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