Hamann, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein on the Language of Philosophers

Jonathan Gray

Royal Holloway, University of London

In this chapter I shall examine some of Johann Georg Hamann's claims about how philosophers misuse, misunderstand, and are misled by language. I will then examine how he anticipates things that Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Wittgenstein say on this topic. All three thinkers are suspicious of philosophers who consider artificial systems of "pure reason" or "formal logic" more valuable than natural language in the search for philosophical insight. They all challenge the notion that natural language "gets in the way" of reason, and should be radically formalized into (or even retired in favor of) a more logically or conceptually perfect language. Hamann is responding to the enthusiasm for *reine Vernunft* exhibited by his friend Immanuel Kant and the loose-knit group that would later come to be known as the *Aufklärer*. Nietzsche is profoundly critical of the idealism of many of his philosophical predecessors, including Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer. Wittgenstein turns away from Frege's and Russell's logical philosophies, and rejects the British idealism (deeply influenced by Kant and Hegel) that had been dominant in earlier decades.

Hamann, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein all contend that reason and logic come from and are dependent upon natural language, which changes over time, and which responds to the interests and circumstances of its users. They all suggest that philosophers can benefit from a richer and more nuanced awareness of how our concepts and the ways in which we reason are born out of language, which is a complex, dynamic, variegated phenomenon, reflecting the complex, dynamic, variegated nature of human life and behavior.

While the extent to which one can trace direct lines of influence from Hamann to Nietzsche to Wittgenstein is debatable, Hamann was an important influence on the post-Kantian German philosophical landscape which informed Nietzsche's and Wittgenstein's work. While Nietzsche and Wittgenstein are often effectively regarded as isolates, much is to be gained by examining the rich tradition in which they stand.[1] This essay strives to flesh out and examine three small episodes in a much bigger story about the turn to language in German philosophy.

Hamann

Throughout his writings, Hamann playfully contests the notion that we can separate reason from language. Philosophers may imagine that their reasoning is largely autonomous, and that language is the imperfect, exchangeable, superfluous, and perhaps even dispensable medium through which their thoughts are expressed, the tattered envelope in which the message is delivered. Conversely, Hamann asserts that "reason is language" (ZH 5:177),[2] that "without a word, no reason = no world," that "without language we would have no reason."[3] Language is that which fundamentally enables our reasoning, not something which merely refracts or distorts it. To recycle Kant's metaphor, if thought is like the flight of a bird, then language is the air by means of which flight is possible, not simply an inconvenient source of resistance.[4]

Philosophers are misguided if they think that abstract technical vocabularies and logical rules will grant them privileged insight into difficult issues. On the contrary, Hamann suggests that specialized jargon distracts philosophers from everyday natural language, which is the fundamental source of our understanding, structuring our experience and making the world meaningful. According to Hamann, language is a living thing, shaped by the people who use it and their contingent historical, social, cultural, and material realities. He writes: "The purpose,

place, time of an author all qualify his expression. Court, school, the business of everyday life, closed guilds, gangs and sects have their own dictionaries."[5] Hamann sees language as being shaped by well-known phrases, expressions, quotations, images, and metaphors. It is a bricolage of fragments reflecting the past of the linguistic community, a collection of "jumbled verses and *disjecti membra poetae*" (Haynes, 65). He talks of the "public treasury of language" and says that "money and language stand in a closer relationship than one might expect" and that "the wealth of all human knowledge rests on the exchange of words" (Haynes, 32, 22). While the analogy between money and language may be familiar,[6] Hamann seems to be using it (at least in part) to make a structural comparison between monetary and linguistic transactions. Both take place against the background of past exchanges. Just as the price of a loaf of bread is affected by previous purchases, the meaning of a word is affected by past usage.[7]

Hamann writes that words "become determinate objects for the understanding only through their institution and meaning in usage" (Haynes, 216). Language is shaped and changed by a vast backlog of past usages, in a plethora of different contexts. The further language departs from these original usages and contexts, the more impoverished and tenuous it becomes. Thus, Hamann strongly opposed certain forms of managing or purifying language, from the French Academy's charge to prepare a defining good linguistic practice, to the proposed abolishment of the allegedly redundant letter *h*. Attempts to reform or formalize language, which Hamann sardonically describes as "cutting, trimming, purifying and edifying the system of universal human reason," overlook the fact that anything other than "arbitrary fundamental principles" will be like a "furnace of ice," that is, impossible (Haynes, 154). The "purity of a language dispossesses it of its wealth" (Haynes, 31), a point which anticipates Wittgenstein's claim that

the philosophical demand for purity is in conflict with the need for friction, for the impurities, ambiguities, and roughness that enable language to function.[8]

In the *Metacritique* of 1784, Hamann writes about the history of philosophical attempts to purify reason and to separate it first from "tradition and custom and belief," second from "experience and everyday induction," and finally from language (Haynes, 207). He is bemused at the naivete of these attempted purifications and separations. It is tradition, experience, and language that shape our outlook on the world, our most fundamental notions of space, time, causality, number—not the elaborate system of categories and intuitions presented in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (Haynes, 211).

Whereas Kant's prose seeks to strip away tradition, Hamann places it at the center of his writings. His prose is bursting with allusions, quotations, fragments, and metaphors. His writing gestures toward its own dependence on a rich tradition of contingent events, stories, figures, and images in the world of letters. Whereas Kant pursues "systematic unity" and seeks to uncover sound foundations for an "architectonic of pure reason" against the notion of a "rhapsodic" (*rhapsodistisch*) "accumulation" (*gehäuft, coacervatio*), it seems that it is precisely the latter in which Hamann is interested.[9]

Experience is, for Hamann, equally inseparable from reason. Whereas Kant strives to separate the sensible and the intelligible, to make a clear distinction between before and after experience, Hamann suggests that these are married in language. Kant strives to clarify and sharpen abstract concepts, categories, and relations, to create a universal analytical toolkit which can be deployed to assist with matters of science, morality, theology, aesthetics, and anything else. This involves boiling away what is contingent and based on experience, to get to the lean core of pure and universal reason. But for Hamann natural language is the closest that we can

come to this toolkit, and the attempt to purify it is futile and misleading. For if we keep boiling, we will be left with nothing but an empty vessel, and if we redefine terms arbitrarily without due regard for our experience of their usage, we will be reduced to manipulating meaningless symbols (Haynes, 215–16).

Kant's *Critique* depends on abstract expressions which are carefully defined and invested with a special significance. Hamann's *Metacritique* is rich with the same vocabulary, which he uses facetiously, employing puns, wordplay, and allusions to restore the ordinary meanings of Kant's abstract terminology. Whereas Kant uses "analysis" and "synthesis" in an unusual technical sense, for example, Hamann treats them as commonplaces: "Analysis is nothing more than the latest fashionable cut, and synthesis nothing more than the artful seam of a professional leather- or cloth-cutter" (Haynes, 217). Hamann's rendering of Kant's conceptual system makes the latter buckle and distort under the weight of connotation, pun, and past usage.

Hamann accuses philosophers of using language in abstract and unusual ways, without regard for the way that words are characteristically used. He warns that "words as undetermined objects of empirical concepts are entitled critical appearances, spectres, non-words or unwords." Metaphysics "abuses" language and transforms its "honest decency" into "empty sacks and slogans" (Haynes, 216, 210). "A general term," he writes, "is an empty bag which changes its shape every moment, and, overextended, bursts." Moreover, Hamann suggests that philosophers reify these general terms, assuming that there must be something to which they correspond. They mistake "words for concepts and concepts for the things themselves" (O'Flaherty, 75, 89). Later Nietzsche will make a similar point about the person who forgets "that the original perceptual metaphors are metaphors and takes them to be the things themselves."[10] As we shall see, Wittgenstein too warns against taking our ordinary ways of speaking literally, and suggests that

philosophers are prone to inferring that there are strange things and processes behind our figures of speech.

If philosophers traffic in abstractions, Hamann draws attention to the things behind them by foregrounding tradition and experience. When, in *Aesthetica in nuce*, he calls his twin inspirations "Nature and Scripture," the "materials of the beautiful, creative and imitative spirit" (Haynes, 85), this means examining language and tradition, which for Hamann includes the Bible, classical literature, and exemplary modern literature (such as Shakespeare). The interpretation of the history of our words and concepts should not be confined to the history of philosophical meanings, but should account for biblical and literary texts, particularly since myths and metaphors have an "inexhaustible quality" when compared to the dry technical prose of philosophers.[11] (As we will see, Nietzsche later takes up a similar idea.) And throughout his writing, Hamann suggests that our knowledge is ultimately derived from our experience. He writes that "there is nothing in our understanding without having previously been in our senses" (O'Flaherty, 60–61).

Hamann's arguments about the importance of experience are not just epistemological; his disdain for abstraction is theological in nature, as well. There is something blasphemous about philosophers' preoccupation with abstractions, because our ordinary experience is a manifestation of our relationship with God (a sentiment which resonates with Kierkegaard's existence-communication or Rudolph Bultmann's realized eschatology): "Every reaction of man unto created things is an epistle and seal that we partake of the divine nature, and that we are his offspring" (Haynes, 79). Our experience of the world is thus intrinsically valuable, not just an epistemological input. Abstraction distracts us from our relation to creation and to the creator. When interpreting Hamann's linguistic "metacritique" of philosophy, it is worth bearing in mind

that his faith is at the center of his authorship. His criticisms of Kant and other philosophers are intended to rescue some of the great minds of his generation from their empty ideals, to show them the divinity in experience, life, and nature, and to turn them to the Cross.

Nietzsche

While Nietzsche read Hamann, characteristically, he does not allude to him in any of his published works. An unpublished fragment reveals that Nietzsche was "very edified" by Hamann, whom he calls "very deep and profound."[12] This scarcity of references to Hamann notwithstanding, there are strong similarities between Hamann's and Nietzsche's views on the relationship between language and philosophy.

Like Hamann, Nietzsche had an unusual philosophical writing style for his time. This reflects his view that style is an integral part of philosophical authorship. Nietzsche prided himself on the brevity, lightness, and humor of his style, and preferred what he saw as the nimble buoyancy, the *presto*, of French and southern European writers and thinkers (François de La Rochefoucauld, Nicolas Chamfort, Michel de Montaigne, Niccolò Machiavelli) to the oppressive weight of German philosophical prose.[13] He famously said that he considered "deep problems like cold baths: quickly into them, and quickly out again" (*GS* 381). Elsewhere he compares his writing to "reconnaissance raids."[14]

Nietzsche, like Hamann, is suspicious of system building. While Hamann writes that "system itself is a hindrance to truth" (ZH 6:276), Nietzsche writes: "I mistrust all systematists. The will to system is a lack of integrity" (*TI* 1:26). They both call Spinoza a spider (*Spinne*), alluding to Bacon's metaphors for scholarly activity and comparing philosophical systems to

cobwebs, devoid of life.[15] Instead, Nietzsche gives us scattered collections of aphorisms and fragments.

Also shared with Hamann is Nietzsche's mistrust of writing for the general public. He dedicates *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to "everyone and no-one," which may recall Hamann's dedication of his flying letter to "nobody, the well known." He emphasizes that his books are not meant to be universal; rather he has in mind new philosophers, great men, and the like. He strives to "keep away" and "forbid" the "rabble" from his writings by using "subtle laws of style" and by making his suggestions sound like "follies," "crimes," or "poison" (*GS* §381; *BGE* §30).

As Hamann's works were known to many prominent thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Nietzsche may well have been indirectly influenced by Hamann, in addition to being directly acquainted with his texts. Wilhelm Wackernagel, one of Nietzsche's fellow professors in philology at the University of Basel, delivered a lecture entitled "On the Origin and Development of Language" which Nietzsche was probably acquainted with, and which was predominantly based on Herder's work on the origin of language (which was in turn influenced by Hamann).[16] Published in 1872, the same year that Nietzsche's "Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" was composed, Wackernagel's lecture describes how language was originally poetic and became increasingly abstract, losing touch with its sensual origin as it developed. This thesis is central to the story told in Nietzsche's own essay.

In "Truth and Lie," Nietzsche suggests that all our truths and our knowledge are actually based on deception, gross oversimplification, falsification, and illusion. Language plays a central role in his account. The liar defies linguistic conventions by misapplying terms; in a deeper sense *all* of our language is predicated upon lies. We pick out an arbitrary aspect of something in our experience, such as the twisting (*schlingen*) of a snake, and then assign it as a designator:

Schlange (literally, "twister"). The variety of designators in different languages for any given thing demonstrates that languages are not adequate representations of the world, but rather contingent, subjective representations of it. Nietzsche points to the arbitrariness of gender and one-sidedness of the properties highlighted by linguistic terms as examples of how language does not so much represent the world as distort it ("TL" 116).

Language petrifies the world into metaphors and concepts, so that we can cope with the "fiery liquid" of our experience. Language is a lie to protect us from obliteration. Truth is orthogonal to the development of language; with too much of it our consciousness "would be immediately destroyed" ("TL" 119). This suggestion is meant to emphasize our dependence on the fabricated conception of the world in language. Since the words we use imply clearly demarcated things with stable identities, language perpetuates myths about the world and, if not derived from "never-never land," is "at least not derived from the essence of things" ("TL" 117).

While language, and hence our view of the world, is predicated on falsifications, Nietzsche sees this as a matter of degree. He says that language has different orders of generality, from the lower orders of images, fragments, and reflections to the higher orders of abstract systems, structures with their own internal logic and coherence. Like Hamann, he posits a spectrum from the living fluidity of metaphors, like the river (or "fiery liquid") of our experience, to the dried bone and brittle scaffolding (the "great edifice") of our concepts, which "displays the rigid regularity of a Roman columbarium" (this architectural metaphor may remind us of Kant's notion of the "architectonic of pure reason"). Also like Hamann, Nietzsche sees poetry as genealogically prior to prose, and closer to experience. On the one hand, metaphors, which posit a relationship of similarity between their vehicle and tenor, are fundamentally "individual" and "elude all classification" ("TL" 118). On the other hand, concepts are the

hardened residues of metaphors. They equate what is unequal, overlook what is individual or actual, and concentrate on commonalities ("TL" 117).

While the "rational man" of concepts (presumably the philosopher) seeks to subsume the world under his conceptual scaffolding, the "intuitive man" who favors metaphors will happily "smash this framework to pieces . . . and put it back together in an ironic fashion" (here we may be reminded of Hamann's treatment of Kant's *Critique*). Our conceptual edifices are constantly in danger of buckling from the flux, the "running water" of experience. Nietzsche admires the "genius of construction" who builds a conceptual system of "spider webs" delicate enough to be carried along by the waves of our experience, but suggests that ultimately, metaphors will confound conceptual systems. "The drive toward the formation of metaphors," Nietzsche writes, "is the fundamental human drive, which one cannot for a single instant dispense with in thought" ("TL" 121). Philosophers and other system builders can only hope to (temporarily) save from destruction their conceptual edifices, which inhabit "the land of ghostly schemata, the land of abstractions," whereas the "overjoyed hero" of intuition and metaphor will reap a "harvest of continually inflowing illumination, cheer and redemption" ("TL" 122–23).

Nietzsche too believes that language depends on a tradition of images, fragments, and metaphors. In a now infamous passage from "Truth and Lie," he describes truth as "a movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms" which we have forgotten are such, and compares truths to "coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins" ("TL" 117)—recalling Hamann's comparison of language to money. Edward Young (who was an important influence on Hamann, Herder and many other thinkers in this period)[17] also uses the metaphor to express the importance of original composition, suggesting that when thoughts "become too common" and "lose their currency," we should "send new metal

to the mint," or generate new metaphors and new meanings.[18] Though the context is different, this use of the metaphor is in many ways complementary to Nietzsche's. Hamann writes in a similar vein of the poetic genius who, "once in centuries," may "manage the public treasury with wisdom . . . or increase it with shrewdness" (Haynes, 32).

Many of the ideas in "Truth and Lie" recur throughout Nietzsche's works. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he writes that our interpretation of the world is fundamentally predicated on lies, as we "fabricate the greater part of the experience." When we look at a tree, for example, we do not see the individual leaves and branches, but "put together an approximation" of a tree (*BGE* §192). The opposition between the abstractions of philosophers and the complex contingencies of history, the dynamic fluidity of nature, and the richness of experience will also remain important for Nietzsche. He writes that philosophers hate the idea of "becoming," and "think they are doing a thing an honor when they dehistoricize it, *sub specie aeterni*—when they make a mummy out of it." Philosophers handle "conceptual mummies" such that "nothing real has ever left their hands alive" (*TI* 2:1).

Most crucial for present purposes, however, is the pseudo-naturalistic account of the development of language offered in Nietzsche's later writings. In *The Gay Science*, he suggests that the development of language arises because of the human being's inherent "weakness." While stronger, solitary creatures do not require language, human beings, weaker herd creatures, stand to benefit from being able to communicate. Language turns a world of unique actions into a world of common kinds and types, of shared properties, enabling human beings to deal with the world more effectively (*GS* §354). Language is thus rooted in "commonness" (*Gemeinheit*). Concepts designate "frequently recurring or associated sensations" experienced by a particular group of people. This clustering of sensations arises out of necessity, as in situations of danger it

is important "to reach agreement quickly and easily as to what has to be done," and "not to misunderstand one another." "The history of language," he writes, "is the history of a process of abbreviation," which naturally foregrounds shared understandings of frequently encountered everyday situations (*BGE* §268).

But language's crude and superficial distinctions are capable of describing only what is average and common to humans. Language "vulgarizes" the world (*TI* 9:26); "communication is shameless; words dilute and brutalize; words depersonalize; words make the uncommon common."[19] Hence language not only simplifies the world, but does so in a way that reflects the "herd" nature of human beings. It often overlooks individuals who may be "more select, subtle, rare and harder to understand" (*BGE* §268).

If language is responsible for our belief in "unity, identity," it also accounts for philosophical preoccupations like "duration, substance, cause, materiality" (*TI* 3:5). "A philosophical mythology lies concealed in language," Nietzsche writes. He describes how our philosophical concepts and discourse follow the same familiar orbits as though they were enchanted. Indeed, he writes that overlaps and affinities between Indian, Greek, and German philosophies are due to resemblances between the languages in which they are composed (*BGE* §20).

But what is the precise nature of language's influence on us? Nietzsche writes of our "unconscious domination and directing by . . . grammatical functions" (*BGE* §20). He claims that we are accustomed to inferring a doer from a deed, that we are led to think that all action comes from an actor or subject. For example, we speak of lightning as though it were separate from the flash of light; we say that the "lightning flashes," or that the "lightning" (subject/doer) does "flashing" (verb/doing). Whereas our mode of speaking populates the world with subjects in this

way, Nietzsche says that "no such substratum exists; there is no 'being' behind doing, acting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction imposed on the doing—the doing itself is everything" [20] . We are accustomed to thinking of "nouns" that represent "things" and "verbs" that are the "doing," as this is how we encounter the world in language. Nietzsche's point is that lightning *is* the flashing, is the passage of electrically charged particles from the clouds to the ground, which we experience as a burst of light in the sky. There is literally no "thing" called lightning, only the "doing" of lightning. Even in this case, of saying that lightning is "doing," the structure of language may lead us to ask who or what the "doer" is. Language presents us with a "crude world of stability, of 'things,'" "beings," and "substances" and is "useless for expressing 'becoming'" (*WP* 715).

Nietzsche suggests that the "I" is another fiction of language, and is perhaps at the root of our notions of "substance" and "being"; we project belief in the "I" onto all things (*TI* 3:5). In the *Nachlass* (his 'legacy' or 'estate' of unpublished writings), he writes that the "I" is a "mental construction," a "regulative fiction according to which we project some kind of permanence . . . on to a world of becoming," and that "the belief in grammar, in the linguistic subject, object, in verbs has, thus far, subjugated the metaphysicians."[21] His analysis of phrases such as "I think" and "I will" in *Beyond Good and Evil* is much like the lightning case above: philosophers infer the existence of a mysterious "subject" entity in the world from the grammatical structure of our sentences. He suggests that there is something almost theological about the way language presents the world. "I am afraid we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar" (*TI* 3:5), he writes, a claim which surely resonates with Hamann's often Johannine views of language.

Rather than treating words "as if they were a wonderful dowry from some sort of wonderland," Nietzsche preaches an "absolute skepticism toward all inherited concepts" (*WP* 409). He writes that "what things *are called* is incomparably more important than what they are," and that the "appearance" of language "becomes effective as essence." We cannot distill pure meanings because the linguistic terms we use, complete with their baggage of complex interrelations and contingent histories, are effectively the meanings themselves; it is misleading to think of something else standing behind them. Hence philosophers should be aware of how language has developed—as a history of fictions, metaphors, images, associations—rather than accepting at face value the picture of the world it presents (*GS* §58). This is crucial in the *Genealogy of Morality*, where Nietzsche gives us a pseudo-naturalistic account of how various moral terms (such as "good" and "bad") arose and developed in response to historical needs, circumstances, and pressures, and suggests that moral philosophers may benefit from studying etymology (*GM* 1:17).

Like Hamann, Nietzsche is interested in the creation of new images, stories, and metaphors. Rather than simply teasing out, refining, and harmonizing the metaphysical and axiomatic assumptions implicit in language, he suggests that language can be used to create new values. He writes that "it is enough to create new names and estimations and probabilities in order to create in the long run new 'things'" (*GS* §58).

Throughout his texts, Nietzsche presents philosophers as brave experimenters, as bold creators who may help to transvaluate existing values. They may help to overcome herd values and to create new fables, images, and fragments to promote values such as independence, self-overcoming, and nobility. We may see many of his most famous motifs in this light, from the overman and the will to power to his fascination with the implications of Copernican cosmology

(see, for example, *BGE* §12 and §71, as well as *GS* §125). Like Hamann he values art and authorship over the philosophical project to reactively articulate our assumptions about the world (derived from language) in the form of a philosophical system.

Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein's writings, like Nietzsche's, contain relatively few direct references to the works of other philosophers. He may have been acquainted with the works of Hamann and Nietzsche via Fritz Mauthner, who was deeply influenced by these two philosophers, and who in turn was a significant influence on Wittgenstein.[22] Wittgenstein may also have known Hamann via Kierkegaard, who called Hamann one of the "perhaps most brilliant minds of all time."[23]

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein presents us with a wonderful metaphor comparing language to an "ancient city," asking us to imagine "a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses" (*PI* 1:18). This metaphor introduces many of Wittgenstein's key ideas about language in the *Investigations*. There are different "suburbs" for different kinds of language, with different vocabulary, different sentence structures, and different ways of using words. Language, like a city, is living and changing. It is heterogeneous, performing many different functions and reflecting the diversity of needs and activities of its users.

The *Philosophical Investigations* strive to unpack and explore a key insight from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, namely that "the tacit conventions on which the understanding of everyday language depends are enormously complicated."[24] Throughout the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein aims to illuminate the stark contrast between philosophical conceptions of what

language is and how it functions, and observations about how it actually works and the different ways it is used. The text can read like a dialogue, in which he Socratically interrogates different woefully inadequate and one-sided philosophical conceptions of language, aided by impressionistic sketches, architectural drafts, road maps and schematic diagrams of the sprawling ancient city called language.

Specifically, Wittgenstein targets philosophical interpretations of language which aim to reduce it to a single function and eliminate its imperfections, reformulating what is meaningful using a parsimonious and expressively adequate logical language and discarding what is left as superfluous. For example, he examines philosophers' claims that "individual words in language name objects," that "every word in language signifies something," that "every assertion contains an assumption," or that "the purpose of a language is to express thoughts" (*PI* 1:1, 13, 22, 501). He goes on to explore these claims by representing them in basic models or "language games," iteratively adding complexity and exposing their flaws, limitations, inadequacies, and one-sidedness.

Philosophers may think that all words are like basic nouns which refer to things in the world. But in that case what do words like "red" or "five" refer to? Frege claims that all sentences are essentially assertoric, and can be expressed in the form "it is asserted that such-and-such is the case." But isn't this like saying that because we can express every sentence as a question answered by "yes," language consists of nothing but questions (*PI* 1:1, 22)? While philosophers may think that language can effectively be reduced to a very limited number of basic functions, words behave differently in different contexts. Philosophers should survey and scrutinize these contexts and study how language actually works before assuming the approximate accuracy of an overly simplistic model. It is a significant cause of "philosophical

disease," Wittgenstein says, that philosophers often have "only one kind of example" in mind (*PI* 1:11–14, 23, 593).

Like Hamann, Wittgenstein argues that what philosophers may mistake for stubborn and dispensable idiosyncrasy is actually part of language's wealth. Whereas philosophers pursue "the crystalline purity of logic," they will discover that when they get to "slippery ice where there is no friction," they will be "unable to walk." Philosophers want to discover the underlying logic, the essence of language—whether through metaphysical systems that unwittingly explicate the worldview implicit in our grammar; or by separating the reason that inheres within language from all of language's manifold ambiguities; or by constructing new logical languages which tend towards both conceptual perspicuity and expressive adequacy. But, Wittgenstein argues, there is no secret essence, no hidden underlying structure waiting to be discovered. Language "already lies open to view," and "since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain." The philosophical search for the essence of language is a pernicious wild goose chase. Like Poe's purloined letter, language is in plain view, hidden from philosophers only because they expect it to be elaborately concealed. In striving to rid language of its ambiguities and roughness, philosophers also remove its expressive wealth and power. "In order to find the real artichoke," he writes, "we divested it of its leaves" (*PI* 1:107, 92, 126, 164).

One of Wittgenstein's most famous and important points in the *Investigations* is that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (*PI* 1:43). Like Hamann and Nietzsche, he argues that the meaning of particular words is derived from a tradition of characteristic contexts and everyday uses.[25] The meanings of words depend on past usage and on practices of interpretation that we learn when we learn a language. We learn to look from "wrist to fingertip" when somebody points at something, not vice versa; there is nothing intrinsic about this gesture that we

should interpret it this way. To know how to obey a rule is to know how to follow a "custom" or "institution," and to understand a language "means to be master of a technique." These uses and practices are not permanently fixed, but are subject to change and renegotiation. Language is embedded in the bustle and throng of linguistic communities and their vast array of different aims, needs, and purposes. It is a "spatial and temporal phenomenon" (*PI* 1:185, 198–99, 108), such that the meanings of words change over time.[26] While allusions to the development of language in Wittgenstein's work are relatively scarce, in part 2 of the *Investigations* he suggests that it is a matter of contingency that language has developed the way it has. He proposes that philosophers can "invent fictitious natural history" to emphasize that our concepts can change radically over time (*PI* 2:xii). This could be intended to point to something like the pseudo-historical naturalistic narratives of Hume, Hamann, Herder, Nietzsche, and others.

Wittgenstein shares some of Hamann's and Nietzsche's ideas about how philosophers misinterpret language. He famously wrote that "philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*" and suggests that philosophy is "a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language." "When we do philosophy we are like savages," he writes, "who hear the expressions of civilized men, put a false interpretation on them, and then draw the queerest conclusions from it." Philosophers take our figurative ways of speaking literally, mistaking the vehicle of the metaphor for its tenor, thinking of "time as a queer medium" or "mind as a queer kind of being" (*PI* 1:38, 109, 194, 196). Like Hamann, Wittgenstein says that philosophers stray from normal to abnormal uses of language, and that the "more abnormal the case, the more doubtful it becomes what we are to say." Rather we should make sure that we ask, "is the word ever actually used this way in the language which is its original home?" (*PI* 1:116).

Wittgenstein also shares many of Hamann's and Nietzsche's concerns about philosophers' love of abstractions, and their desire to identify essential, defining properties of different words and general concepts. For example, he says that philosophers look at different kinds of games and say that "there *must* be something common, or they would not be called 'games.'" However, if we "*look and see*" we will observe that there is not a single common denominator, but rather a series of family resemblances, like overlapping fibers in a thread (*PI* 1:142, 193–94, 66–67).

Wittgenstein believes that it is the role of philosophy to identify and eradicate the mistakes that arise from misunderstanding our ways of speaking. He thinks that philosophers, qua philosophers, should not "interfere with language," "draw conclusions," or "advance *theses*" (*PI* 1:124, 599, 128). They should not aim to solve philosophical problems, but rather should highlight the misinterpretations and mistakes that make them appear. If philosophical problems are like illnesses, philosophy should be a range of therapies to treat them; it should aim "to shew the fly out of the fly-bottle." Philosophers should strive to "give philosophy peace" by revealing "disguised nonsense" as "patent nonsense." Like Hamann, Wittgenstein wants to debunk unusual metaphysical interpretations of language and restore ordinary meanings of words, "to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use." Thus we must carefully examine the multiplicity of contexts in which words are used, nourish our diet with many examples, and try to see where we have gone wrong. We must strive to "command a clear view of the use of our words," to gain a "perspicuous representation" (*PI* 1:90, 309, 133, 464, 116, 122). Or, referring to the metaphor of language as a city, if philosophical problems have the form, "I don't know my way about," philosophers should "look around" and see where we have taken a wrong turn. Philosophy should thus consist of assembling reminders to prevent philosophers from getting lost

or confused (*PI* 1:123, 127). This is likely what Wittgenstein conceived himself as doing in the *Investigations* and other later works.

Conclusions

Given the similarities between Hamann's, Nietzsche's, and Wittgenstein's views on how philosophers misuse language, we might argue that, in one form or another, they all put forward a form of linguistic critique, or metacritique, of philosophy. All three hold that philosophers underestimate the extent to which language shapes their philosophical outlook. All three claim that philosophers misuse language and are misled by abstract linguistic terms to conceive of things, properties, and processes which do not exist. All three suggest that we should approach philosophers' use of language with some wariness. And all three encourage philosophers to pay more attention to language's richness and complexity, including its historical dimensions and the multiformity of ways in which it is used in practice.

How have lessons like these been digested? On the one hand we have the legacy of the genealogical approach, which is characterized by the recognition that meanings change over time, and that the history of terms and ideas is full of conflict and contingency. There is a reorientation away from the quest for essential definitions or exhaustive criteria for concepts such as "art" or "freedom"—and a shift toward understanding these words in terms of a dynamic constellation of different historical texts and contexts. On the other hand we have the legacy of the Wittgensteinian approach, which suggests that philosophers should pay close attention to how language is actually used.[28]

While Wittgenstein's work points to the potential of using language creatively in order to identify and unravel philosophical problems, he does not articulate a vision in which

philosophers play an active role in the creation of new texts or tropes. On the contrary, Hamann and Nietzsche seem to be excited by the notion of interfering with language in different ways, rather than simply formalizing the views passed down in it. Hamann was fascinated by literary creation, and no doubt contributed to the growth of the *Geniekult* and the explosion of interest in a new German literature, not least by inculcating in his former student Herder an interest in Shakespeare, Young, and folk culture. While he does not explicitly point to the promise of specifically philosophical literature or a (more) literary philosophy, Hamann stands near the beginning of a period of great overlap and entanglement between philosophy and literature in the German tradition, and his work anticipates more contemporary reflection on the relationship between philosophy, language, and literature.[29] Nietzsche's *Philosoph der Zukunft* ('philosopher of the future') combines the refined perceptive acuity of the philologist with the ingenuity, judgment, and imagination of the great artist. Nietzsche's own philosophical writing, his emphasis on the importance of philosophical style, and his penchant for creating new tropes has had an immense influence on countless subsequent writers and thinkers.

By challenging philosophers' veneration of pure reason, logical systems, and formalized abstract concepts, Hamann, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein throw open the floodgates to new sources of insight and new ways of doing philosophy. The crisis in confidence in the project to create a special, formalized philosophical language can also be seen as an opportunity to broaden the base of subject matter and the range of activities which can be considered a legitimate part of philosophical activity. Rather than simply looking for a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for our understanding of justice, or creating a formal definition which we test against a range of convoluted edge cases, we can open up our enquiry to a universe of historical and cultural material, from legal, political, and religious texts to the works of Kafka or Kleist. Literature may

also be considered an important site for philosophical reflection, from the moral or phenomenological musings of Dostoevsky or Proust to the metaphysical flights of fancy of Jorges Luis Borges or Italo Calvino. Hamann is an early and important influence on a tradition which sees the study of natural language, in all its richness, in all of its manifestations, as absolutely central to philosophical enquiry.

Notes

1. There have been several English-language studies which examine the works of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein in the light of this tradition. See, for example, Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1996); Christian Emden, *Nietzsche on Language, Consciousness and the Body* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

3. Quoted in James C. O'Flaherty, *Unity and Language: A Study in the Philosophy of Johann Georg Hamann* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 31, 36–37. Hereafter cited in the text as "O'Flaherty."

4. Kant writes, "The light dove, cleaving the air in her free flight, and feeling its resistance, might imagine that its flight would be still easier in empty space." See *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), 47.

5. Johann Georg Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, ed. and trans. Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 41. Hereafter cited in the text as "Haynes."

6. See Richard T. Gray, "Buying into Signs: Money and Semiosis in Eighteenth-Century German Language Theory," *German Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 1–14.

7. Various philosophers have continued to use this metaphor. For example, Gilbert Ryle (a contemporary of Wittgenstein, who shared many of his views) wrote: "Roughly, as Capital stands to Trade, so Language stands to Speech." Gilbert Ryle and J. N. Findlay, "Use, Usage and Meaning," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 35 (1961): 223.

8. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 1:107. Hereafter cited in the text as *PI*.

9. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 653.

10. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," in *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson and Duncan Large (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 119. Hereafter cited in the text as "TL."

11. See also Gwen Griffith-Dickson, *Johann Georg Hamann's Relational Metacriticism* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995), 66.

12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich, 1980), 7:509.

13. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1973), §28, §240; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), §95, §103, §104. Hereafter cited in the text as *BGE* and *GS*, respectively.

14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Hereafter cited in the text as *TI*.

15. See Sarah Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), 69; O'Flaherty, *Unity and Language,* 76.

16. See Emden, *Nietzsche on Language*, 63–64.

17. See Martha Woodman, "The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the 'Author,'" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17 (1984): 425–48. For more on Young's influence on Hamann, see John Louis Kind, *Young in Germany* (London: Macmillan, 1905).

18. Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*, ed. Edith J. Morley (Manchester: University Press, 1918), 8.

19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 810. Hereafter cited in the text as *WP*.

20. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1:13. Hereafter cited in the text as *GM*.

21. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke,* 7/3:35. Cited in Emden, *Nietzsche on Language*, 80.

22. I am grateful to Kenneth Haynes for pointing this out to me. See Janik and Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna,* for more on Mauthner's influence on Wittgenstein. For more on Hamann and Nietzsche's influence on Mauthner, see Elizabeth Bredeck, *Metaphors of Knowledge: Language and Thought in Mauthner's Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992); Gershon Weiler, *Mauthner's Critique of Language* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1970). Wittgenstein alludes to Mauthner in the *Tractatus*, 4.0031.

23. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: Kierkegaard's Writings, VIII,* ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 178, 198.

24. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (New York: Humanities, 1961), 4.022.

25. See *PI* 1:432; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 4.

26. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), 65.

27. See, for example, Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Volume I* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Raymond Geuss, *History and Illusion in Politics* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Nietzsche's genealogical approach was also very influential for twentieth-century theorists such as Michel Foucault.

28. A notable offshoot of this approach is the "ordinary language philosophy" of philosophers such as Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin, and Peter Strawson. See, for example, Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); and Strawson, *Individuals* (London: Routledge, 1964). The relationship between Wittgenstein's project and ordinary language philosophy is subject to debate, and the latter is certainly not without its critics.

29. For example in the works of Richard Rorty, Stanley Cavell, and Alexander Nehemas.