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Renan Silva

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Political liberalism and the metaphysics of languages

Renan Silva 

Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy and International Relations, Central European University, Vienna, Austria

ABSTRACT

Many political theorists believe that a state cannot be neutral when it comes to languages. Legislatures cannot avoid picking a language in which to conduct their business and teachers have to teach their pupils in a language. However, against that, some political liberals argue that liberal neutrality is consistent with the state endorsement of particular languages. Claims to the contrary, they say, are based on a misguided understanding of what neutrality is. I will argue that this line of argument fails, for two reasons. First, the primary challenge to which political liberals should respond is not that of reconciling the promotion of languages with liberal neutrality but, rather, that of reconciling liberal neutrality with the fact that reasonable people disagree about the existence and nature of languages. Second, even if everyone accepted the existence of languages along essentialist lines, one should still doubt the possibility of state neutrality with respect to them, regardless of the conception of neutrality one prefers. The reason why is that human beings cannot care about or value languages so when a state promotes a particular language, it is not supporting the preferences of its citizens but, rather, acting on perfectionist or simply irrational grounds.

KEYWORDS Political liberalism; languages; valuing; linguistic justice; language ethics; culture

Introduction

To many people, it seems to be an obvious fact that a state cannot be neutral in matters of language. The government, public agencies, schools, universities, and so on, all have to operate in a language. This sounds like a blow to political liberalism, given that it holds that a state should be neutral with respect to controversial moral, religious and philosophical doctrines. A state that promotes a certain language is arguably taking a stand on how individuals should live their lives by dictating which forms of linguistic communication are worthy of public recognition. Moreover, one could argue that

CONTACT Renan Silva  renansilva@proton.me

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when a state favours a particular language, it is also favouring a particular culture and all the controversial moral, religious and philosophical doctrines that come with it. So political liberalism seems to be undermined by the fact that a state has to choose some languages over others.

Some political liberals reject these arguments. They maintain that one *can* reconcile the state promotion of particular languages with liberal neutrality, provided that one adopts a more plausible understanding of what neutrality means.

There are two problems in this whole debate. The first is that moral and political philosophers in general have been surprisingly silent on what they mean by a language. While they have paid a lot of attention to the nature of things like culture, gender and race, they have said virtually nothing systematic about the nature of languages. This is especially puzzling in the case of political liberals because they are committed to state neutrality vis-à-vis controversial philosophical doctrines and yet the very existence and nature of languages is highly disputed. To say that a language exists is akin to saying that God exists. Both assertions rely on deeply contentious metaphysical positions. Therefore, before political liberals (or other theorists) discuss whether the state endorsement of particular languages is compatible with liberal neutrality or not, they should explain how the latter can be reconciled with the fact that people disagree about the existence and nature of languages. Second, even if everyone accepted that languages exist and espoused an essentialist understanding of them, there would be grounds to be sceptical that the state endorsement of languages is compatible with liberal neutrality.

The article will be structured as follows. Section two outlines the debate over the state endorsement of languages, discusses how strange it is that moral and political philosophers have not engaged with the metaphysics of languages and gives some preliminary reasons for the importance of political liberals taking that subject into account. Section three then gives more flesh to those reasons by highlighting the extent of philosophical disagreement over the existence of languages. Section four examines two prominent analyses of the nature of languages, which will provide the background for my argument in section five. The latter will contend that we should be sceptical that the state endorsement of languages is compatible with liberal neutrality, even if we are essentialists about languages. Section six concludes.

Political liberalism and the neglect over the metaphysics of languages

The debate over whether the state can be neutral when it endorses certain languages over others has missed two key steps: establishing whether languages exist and, if they do, determining what they are. For one faction of this

debate – political liberals – a third step has been missed: explaining how political liberalism, which rejects appeals to controversial metaphysical theories, can have anything to say about languages, given that the existence and nature of languages are highly disputed. Political liberals, and moral and political philosophers more generally, seem to assume that there are languages but have not explained what they mean by them.¹

I will begin by briefly outlining what the debate about liberal neutrality and the state endorsement of languages is. Then I will discuss the strange silence of political philosophy on the metaphysics of languages and how the controversy over the existence and nature of languages is a major challenge for political liberalism.

Political liberals hold that the state should be neutral between different conceptions of the good life. This means that it should not endorse controversial moral, religious or philosophical views. However, the ideal of neutrality has been criticised by many as implausible, given that the state arguably cannot help but take a stance on such contentious issues (see, e.g. Kramer, 2017, chs. 3–4; pp. 12–33; Quong, 2022, §§7.2–7.5).

A particular source of embarrassment for political liberals has been the charge that a liberal state cannot be neutral in matters of language. Will Kymlicka claims that '[w]hen the government decides the language of public schooling, it is providing what is probably the most important form of support needed by societal cultures, since it guarantees the passing on of the language and its associated traditions and conventions to the next generation' (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 111; see also ch. 5). And the need to choose a language seems obvious:

It is quite possible for a state not to have an established church. But the state cannot help but give at least partial establishment to a culture when it decides which language is to be used in public schooling, or in the provision of state services. The state can (and should) replace religious oaths in courts with secular oaths, but it cannot replace the use of English in courts with no language. (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 111)

Political liberals respond to this criticism in a number of ways, but all accept the alleged inevitability of the state endorsement of particular languages. For example, Brian Barry concedes that '[w]here language is concerned, a state cannot adopt a neutral stance' but notes that 'any language will do as the medium of communication in a society as long as everybody speaks it' (Barry, 2001, p. 107). He argues that the promotion of a single language is justified, even if it undermines neutrality, because it is essential for deliberation between citizens (Barry, 2001, pp. 226–8). As he puts it, '[w]e can negotiate across language barriers but we cannot deliberate together about the way in which our common life is to be conducted unless we share a language' (Barry, 2001, p. 227). Moreover, he says, mastery of a common language is necessary

for equality of opportunity in countries where educational and economic opportunities are only available in the majority language (Barry, 2001, pp. -105–7).

Other political liberals contend, against Barry, that the state promotion of particular languages *is* compatible with liberal neutrality, if we abandon the notion of neutrality as *neutrality of justification*. The latter is the idea that the imposition of moral and political principles and rules is only justifiable if they appeal to common reasons that all reasonable (idealised) individuals share (Quong, 2022; Tahzib, 2018, pp. 511–3). For Anna Stilz, for example, this is not enough for neutrality. For her, a language policy is neutral only if ‘it serves truly important public purposes (such as securing basic rights) and not for merely trivial reasons (like slightly lower administrative costs)’ and if it ‘achieves these important public purposes in a way that is not unduly burdensome to the competing interests of citizens who would like to invest in other languages’ (Stilz, 2009, pp. 268–9; see also p. 272).

Similarly, Alan Patten maintains that the state can be neutral in matters of language, if neutrality is understood as *neutrality of treatment*. According to him, ‘the state is neutral between rival conceptions of the good when, relative to an appropriate baseline, its institutions and policies are equally accommodating of those conceptions’ (Patten, 2014, p. 106). So a neutral language policy, he argues, is one that ‘(a) is compatible with standard liberal rights and entitlements and (b) extends equal recognition to majority and minority languages alike’ (Patten, 2014, p. 199). Thus ‘[t]wo or more languages enjoy equal recognition from public institutions when those institutions extend roughly comparable forms of assistance to each on a prorated basis.’ Under equal recognition,

some account is taken of the number of people demanding services in each recognized language. . . . [F]airness to individuals requires offering the same per capita level of assistance to the different languages those individuals speak. . . . [A] more restricted set of public services may be offered in less widely spoken languages, or speakers of such languages might be expected to travel farther to find services in their own language, or the eligibility of such people to receive services in their own language may be constrained by a ‘where numbers warrant’ proviso. (Patten, 2014, p. 200)

Given the confidence with which political liberals have defended their positions on the relationship between neutrality and the state endorsement of languages, one would be excused for thinking that they had explained why they think languages exist and what they mean by a language. However, neither they nor moral and political philosophers more generally, have done that. While some authors, such as Ricento (2014) and Wright (2015), have been critical of this silence, they themselves have not engaged with the metaphysical literature on languages and simply assumed that scepticism about languages as real, more or less stable, entities is warranted. The lack of

engagement with that literature on the part of political philosophers is striking, as it stands in stark contrast with the high level of scrutiny that many of them have devoted to the related concept of culture. Patten, for example, is silent on what he means by languages but argues at length for his preferred conception of culture (Patten, 2011, 2014, ch. 2).²

While the silence is a problem for moral and political philosophers in general, it is particularly problematic for political liberals. The latter cannot commit themselves to controversial metaphysical doctrines but by maintaining that the state can or cannot be neutral in its endorsement of languages, they are doing precisely that. The existence of languages is a highly disputed matter among theoretical philosophers and even among those who agree that languages exist, they disagree about what these are (more on this below). So instead of spending their energy trying to reconcile liberal neutrality with the state promotion of particular languages, political liberals need, first, to address how they are able to say anything at all about languages, given that the existence and nature of languages are themselves contentious.

A political liberal might respond as follows:

Political liberalism does not need to respond to the fact that the existence and nature of languages are controversial before engaging in the debate over the neutrality of language policy. After all, political liberals are able to talk about matters of religion without having to mention the controversy over whether churches, mosques or synagogues exist. Does the fact that it is controversial among metaphysicians whether ordinary objects such as electric cars or wind turbines exist matter for whether a political liberal can discuss the neutrality of state policies towards climate change? Surely, not.

Of course, we have all heard the saying that ‘a language is a dialect with an army and navy’³ and we all know that there are hard borderline cases when it comes to languages. For example, why are Galician and Portuguese considered different languages even though they are extremely similar, but European Portuguese and Brazilian Portuguese are considered versions of the same language despite various differences? It is a fascinating question, but we cannot get bogged down by borderline cases like this. At the end of the day, in most situations, we have a clear pre-theoretical sense of what languages are. We know that English is not the same as Russian. When we select subtitles for a film on Netflix, they are classified by language. Translators and interpreters specialise in different languages. There are language proficiency exams and grammar books. Our folk concept of a language is enough for us to get by in the world and to debate language policy in political philosophy. Whether languages exist or not is simply irrelevant in practice.

I agree that political liberals do not have to address the controversy over the existence of ordinary objects. However, human beings have long accepted the existence of such objects. If I were to time-travel to medieval Europe and ask at my local tavern for a knife or a boat, most people would know what I was talking about, but if I asked them what *language* they spoke, they would

look at me in bewilderment. Of course, many would be aware that people spoke in different ways, especially those coming from faraway places, but they would not necessarily associate linguistic difference with the existence of different languages. And this perspective would not be limited to the uneducated folk I met at the tavern. As Van Rooy observes, 'pre-1500 [European] scholars usually found it far from obvious and often simply irrelevant to distinguish between different types of linguistic diversity' (Van Rooy, 2020, p. 25). The main exception was their focus on Greek, but even then the discussions were over the literary written 'dialects' of Greek and it was not believed that such dialects made up a common Greek language. Nor were 'dialects' understood in the way they are today, as some kind of linguistic entity (Van Rooy, ch. 2, p. 64).

The fact that both scholars and non-scholars alike have not long accepted the concept of a language, unlike the concept of ordinary objects, shows that contemporary metaphysical disagreement about languages is not something that can be ignored by moral and political philosophy. Moreover, even if people *had* long accepted throughout history the concept of a language as uncontroversial, that would still not mean that moral and political philosophers can just take it for granted. After all, the fact that the concept of gender roles has been accepted as natural for most of human history does not mean that gender roles are, in fact, natural. Moral and political philosophy should be particularly sensitive to claims about the nature of social reality.

Do languages exist?

It will be helpful at this stage to elaborate on what the controversy over the metaphysics of languages is. In this section, I will outline two prominent arguments against the existence of languages and one influential family of views that sees languages as real.

In an article titled 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', Donald Davidson (2005 [1986]) provided the best known systematic attack on the existence of languages. Although there is debate over whether Davidson himself intended to deny the existence of languages in that paper, an argument for eliminativism clearly can be found there (Stainton, 2016, p. 8). According to that article, individuals do not communicate via languages, but rather through a haphazard process of interpretation in which when an individual speaks, her interlocutor draws upon the context of the utterance and her previous knowledge and experience to interpret what the speaker is trying to communicate. One major reason to think that this is how linguistic communication takes place is that people make speech errors that do not impede successful communication. That means that knowledge of a language is neither sufficient nor necessary for successful communication and, therefore, there is no need to postulate the existence of languages.⁴

A different set of arguments against languages has been advanced by Noam Chomsky. For him, it is unlikely that a coherent account of languages can be provided, given the arbitrariness that permeates our ordinary classification of languages. Why, he asks, is Chinese a language, even though its 'dialects' show as many differences among themselves as do 'languages' such as Spanish, Catalan, Portuguese, and Italian (Chomsky, 1986, p. 15, 1988, p. 37)? And even setting aside the problem of arbitrariness, he continues, what kind of entities are languages and how would they fit within a scientific worldview? It might be argued that languages are abstract objects, 'existing in a Platonic heaven alongside of arithmetic and (perhaps) set theory', entities that exist independently of individual minds/brains (Chomsky, 1986, p. 33). But Chomsky finds this implausible:

Knowing everything about the mind/brain, a Platonist would argue, we still have no basis for determining the truths of arithmetic or set theory, but there is not the slightest reason to suppose that there are truths of language that would still escape our grasp. Of course, one can construct abstract entities at will, and we can decide to call some of them 'English' or 'Japanese' and to define 'linguistics' as the study of these abstract objects ... [b]ut there seems little point to such moves. (Chomsky, 1986, pp. 33–4)⁵

What about the notion that there *are* languages? One representative view is that languages are semantic systems that are abstract in nature.⁶ For example, David Lewis claims that a language is '[s]omething which assigns meanings to certain strings of types of sounds or of marks. It could therefore be a function, a set of ordered pairs of strings and meanings. The entities in the domain of the function are certain finite sequences of types of vocal sounds, or of types of inscribable marks' (Lewis, 1983 [1975], p. 163). They are, in other words, 'semantic systems discussed in complete abstraction from human affairs' (Lewis, 1983 [1975], p. 166). The relation between languages and human communication, on this view, is that human beings have a 'common interest in communication' and so come to develop, by convention, the use of languages in order to communicate with one another (Lewis, 1983 [1975], pp. 164–70). 'Conventions are regularities in action, or in action and belief, which are arbitrary but perpetuate themselves because they serve some sort of common interest' (Lewis, 1983 [1975], p. 164).

There is some controversy over whether conventionality implies regular adherence by a group. For Lewis (1983 [1975], pp. 164–5) and Marmor (2009, pp. 3–4), something is a convention if it is a regularity within a population, while for Gilbert (1989, pp. 347–8) and Millikan (1998, p. 170), conventions can be in place even if they are not regularly followed by a certain group of people. For present purposes, the important point is that however one understands language *use* (as either reliant on a population or not), languages *themselves* do not depend on a population for their existence,

according to the theory under consideration. As Davidson summarises this view, '[t]he existence of the Spanish language does not . . . depend on anyone's speaking it, any more than the existence of shapes depends on there being objects with those shapes' (Davidson, 1992, p. 256). Languages, understood as abstract entities, are like musical works or fictional characters in novels (Evrine, 2016, pp. 136–59). Thus, languages are conceptually distinct from linguistic identities, just as cultures cannot be equated with cultural identities (Patten, 2014, pp. 59–60) or genders with gender identities (Barnes, 2022). Social identities are about how one perceives oneself and is perceived by others (Appiah, 2005, pp. 68–9), and so a language can exist without anyone's having any sense of identification with it or without others identifying a person with that language.

Furthermore, proponents of languages argue that natural languages, such as English or Vietnamese, have vague boundaries but that such vagueness does not make them any less real. For example, David Wiggins concedes that the individuation of languages is challenging but that it is no more problematic than the individuation of concrete objects such as tables and roads and so we should be sceptical of arguments that deny the existence of languages based on their vague boundaries (1997, p. 502). Similarly, Timothy Williamson suggests that the problem of determining when two people are speaking different stages of the same language or a different language altogether (e.g. when did Latin become Italian?), is akin to that of establishing when a non-bald person should be considered bald. That is, it is an instance of the *sorites paradox* (Williamson, 1990, pp. 137–41). Thus, just as the indeterminacy of the boundaries of baldness does not mean that there is no property of baldness, one could maintain that the indeterminacy of the boundaries of languages does not mean that there are no languages.

The fact that philosophers hold radically different views on the issue of whether languages exist shows that political liberals owe us an account of how they are able to talk about languages without taking a stance on the metaphysical disputes about the existence of languages.

The nature of languages

Suppose, though, that all members of a society agreed that languages exist (or, if you are a 'public reason' liberal, suppose that all *reasonable*, idealised, individuals agreed that languages exist). That would still not mean that the state endorsement of languages is compatible with liberal neutrality. I will explain why in the next session. But before I do that, we have to consider, first, what languages are (assuming, as we are, that they are real).

There are two main ways in which we can analyse the nature of languages. We can analyse them as *facts/states of affairs* or as *things*.⁷ I will consider each analysis in turn.

First, let us turn to *factualism*⁸ about languages. On this view, languages are facts/states of affairs. A fact/state of affairs is the instantiation of a property by a particular or the instantiation of a relation between two or more particulars (Armstrong, 1997, p. 1). For example, *this lemon's being sour* is the state of affairs in which the lemon (a particular) instantiates the property of being sour. Another example would be the fact *a's loving b*, in which *a* and *b* are the particulars and *loving*, the relation (Armstrong, 1997, p. 119). States of affairs in which there is only a particular and a property or only two or more particulars and a relation are called *atomic* states of affairs. In turn, states of affairs that have other states of affairs as constituents are called *molecular* states of affairs (Armstrong, 1997, p. 1, 122). For the factualist, languages are molecular facts. For example, the English language is a state of affairs containing a multitude of other facts, such as *that 'cat' means cat*, *water's being pronounced (among other ways) as /'wɔ:tə/ and /'wɒdə/*, and *the subject-verb-object word order's being the dominant sentence structure*.

Molecular states of affairs are mereological wholes, that is, they are entities constituted by the mere sum of their parts. Indeed, they are nothing more than their parts and so the union of the parts is not an increase in being—i.e. a mereological whole does not amount to anything extra in the world (Armstrong, 1997, p. 122). If languages are molecular facts and these are mereological wholes, then languages are nothing over and above their constituent states of affairs. In the case of English, for instance, the language is just the aggregate of the states of affairs *that 'cat' means cat*, *that water is pronounced /'wɔ:tə/ and /'wɒdə/* and so on.

Another feature of a state of affairs is that its identity is determined by its constituents and the way these are organised. Thus if two states of affairs have different parts or have the same parts but these are structured differently, then they are not identical (Armstrong, 1997, pp. 131–2). Applied to languages, this means that languages cannot change: once a new element is included in or excluded from the language, we are no longer talking about the same language, but something different. This conclusion admits of two interpretations. One is that it is unlikely that there is, for example, an 'English language' and it is more plausible to say that 'English' is an umbrella term that refers to a potentially infinite number of languages with overlapping characteristics. A second interpretation accepts the existence of 'English' by postulating that it is an ongoing project (by saying, e.g. not that English is 'changing' but that it is currently incomplete) and that people only speak a part of the whole/complete language.

Now consider *thingism* about languages. Perhaps the most sophisticated thingist account of languages available today is that of Evnine (2016, pp. 145–59). For him, languages are abstract artifacts created either by a deliberate action in the case of invented languages such as Esperanto and Klingon, or by the workings of an ideology in the case of

natural languages such as Korean and Farsi (Evnine, 2016, p. 147, 149–50, 154).⁹ An artifact, whether abstract or concrete, is (roughly) an entity brought into existence by an intentional act of creation in which some matter (e.g. bronze in the case of a bronze statue; words, expressions and rules in the case of languages) has had a concept imposed on it by an agent (Evnine, 2016, pp. 17–21, 67, 86–96). It is the original act of creation or the ideology that fix both the essence and the identity of languages. However, just as a bronze statue is made out of bronze but is (arguably) not identical to the bronze, so is a language made out of some matter, namely sets of linguistics expressions with meanings attached to them, but is not identical to that matter.

The centrality of concept imposition, as opposed to original matter, for determining the nature of languages means that they can change over time and could have had different elements than the ones that they currently have (Evnine, 2016, p. 147). Indeed, they can change beyond recognition (Evnine, 2016, p. 153). Thus Portuguese and Spanish are different languages even though they share many linguistic expressions. By contrast, Middle English and contemporary English are arguably the same language because there is an ideology that ties them together under the concept of ‘English’, even though there is little mutual intelligibility between the two (Evnine, 2016, p. 153).

Evnine follows Rumsey’s definition of linguistic ideologies as ‘shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language in the world’ (Evnine, 2016, p. 149; Rumsey, 1990, p. 346). These ‘shared bodies of commonsense notions’, Evnine adds, ‘might comprise just explicitly held beliefs and theories or [they] might be implicit in cultural practices. [They] might be widely shared or highly contested’ (2016, p. 149).¹⁰ Ideology plays, for natural languages, the role that the act of creation does in bringing into existence invented languages, fictional characters, musical works and concrete artifacts (e.g. chairs) (Evnine, 2016, pp. 149–50, 154). It is the emergence of an ideology on the part of a group of people that a certain natural language exists that makes this language come into existence and this language changes or dies depending on the content of the prevailing linguistic ideology held by the group. As Evnine puts it, ‘two examples of linguistic activity might resemble each other very strongly and yet one of them, because of the presence of appropriate linguistic ideology, involve the existence of a language and the other, because of the absence of such ideology, not’ (2016, p. 154). The persistence of a language across different generations also means that it is a tradition, a ‘cross-generational collaboration in a common project’ (Evnine, 2016, p. 154).

Why liberal neutrality cannot be reconciled with the state endorsement of languages (even if we agree on the existence and nature of languages)

In this section, I will argue that even if everyone agrees that languages exist and that the analysis of languages as either facts or things is correct, we should still be sceptical of the idea that the state promotion of particular languages is compatible with liberal neutrality.

The reason for that is that one should be suspicious of the notion that human beings can form attitudes about languages such as caring or valuing. Philosophical reflection casts doubt on whether individuals can care about or value a language, at least highly complex and rich languages such as English, Spanish, Chinese or Welsh. So the state promotion of a particular language cannot be justified by appealing to the fact that there are some people who care about or value them and the fact that liberal neutrality partly implies taking the attitudes of all people into account (or at least those attitudes that are not obviously harmful to society). After all, it seems that *no one* can care about or value languages. Consider an analogy: some people care about ballet or the opera and that is why many countries subsidise these. But if no one could care about these art forms and the state nonetheless insisted on funding ballet or opera productions, it would not be acting in a way that conforms with liberal neutrality. Either it would be acting irrationally or on perfectionist grounds (if, say, there is reason to believe that ballet and opera are valuable for human flourishing).

Below, I will focus on the attitude of valuing and consider three theories of valuing. I will discuss what the combination of each theory with the two accounts of languages outlined in the previous section entails for the plausibility of the political liberal endorsement of languages. First, I will consider the three theories of valuing in combination with factualism. Then, I will turn to the combination of the three theories with thingism. On most combinations, the result is that one cannot value a language.

Theories of valuing + factualism about languages

For Lewis (2000 [1989]), to value something is to desire to desire it. Ordinary usage seems to dictate against saying that 'one desires a language', let alone that 'one desires to desire a language'. One can say that I desire to *learn* a language, just as I can desire to chat with my friend. But talk of desiring to engage in an activity involving an object is quite different from talk of desiring that object itself. A desire to chat with my friend is distinct from a desire for him. But let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that there is nothing odd about saying that one desires a language. Can one actually desire (or desire to desire) a language if factualism is taken for granted?

No, for it is not just our *talk* of desiring languages (as facts) that is odd, but the very idea of desiring languages is absurd.¹¹ First, while in some cases it seems reasonable to desire certain linguistic states of affairs, in many cases it does not. For example, it makes sense to desire that the word 'marriage' mean not only a legal or formal union between a man and a woman but also a union between people of the same sex. But it is odd to desire that 'of' means of, unless, say, there are activists trying to change the meaning of the word 'of' and one wishes not to see that change (think of the acrimonious controversy over pronouns). Second, it is strange to desire linguistic states of affairs that already obtain. If the English language already obtains, it is irrational for someone to desire that it obtain. In other words, if it is already the case that 'cat' means cat, that water is pronounced as /'wɔ:tə/and/'wɔ:dər/, and that the subject-verb-object word order is the dominant sentence structure etc. then it does not make sense for someone to desire them.

Even if we assume that there is nothing odd about desiring languages, we are faced with a further objection. Natural languages are far too large and complex to be the objects of attitudes such as desiring, favouring, or caring. At most, one can value only a tiny portion of a language. Thus if a language is a molecular state of affairs, and one only desires a fraction of the states of affairs contained in that language, then one only desires those states of affairs, not the entire language. For recall that a language, in a state of affairs ontology, is just the mereological sum of more basic states of affairs. Consider the case of English. Even if we focus solely on contemporary English (and leave aside, for instance, Middle English or Early Modern English), there is an incredibly vast number of words that most people will never hear about, let alone know their meaning or use them, such as words from all the various English dialects and academic disciplines. As David Crystal remarks,

[e]ven if we restrict the issue [of the size of the English lexicon] to standard [i.e. written, formal] vocabulary, there are many items which could be included as part of the lexicon, but which are not usually found in a dictionary. There are some half a million abbreviated forms in English . . . , many of which have a clear lexical status (*BA, FBI, NATO*, etc.); and fauna and flora also provide a vast lexical resource. For example, there are apparently some million insects already described, with several million more awaiting description. This means that there must be at least a million designations enabling English-speaking entomologists to talk about their subject. Should all of these be allowed into the word-count as well?

It is difficult to see how even a conservative estimate of English vocabulary could go much below a million lexemes [note: a lexeme is the most basic form of a word or expression]. More radical accounts, allowing in all of scientific

nomenclature, could easily double this figure. Only a small fraction of these totals, of course, is learned by any one of us. (Crystal, 2019, p. 129)

Although English may be uniquely large due to its role as the global *lingua franca*, many other languages are also large enough that most speakers will be able to know only a tiny percentage of their lexicon. This is certainly the case whenever a language is widely used in the media, government and academia.

One might reply that while it may be true that a person cannot value the aggregate of the states of affairs that comprise the language, she can value the *second-order* state that the aggregate of first-order states that make up the language obtain.¹² In that case, a person does not have to know what the first-order states are. For example, she does not need to know that in English, 'fangtooth' is a type of fish that lives in the deep sea or that 'cordwainer' means 'shoemaker'. She only needs to desire that whatever is part of English obtain. However, valuing this kind of second-order state does not seem like a case of valuing a language. For as Jason Raibley notes, 'a person does not really value a given item if they are ignorant of its true nature' (Raibley, 2013, p. 191). Consider an example provided by Dale Dorsey of a person who believes that being the Queen of England is great and who would want this life for herself. She does not actually know what being a monarch is like. She has 'faulty presumptions that being the Queen involves a life of luxury with little responsibility or invasion of privacy'. So 'it's quite right to say that this person does not value *being the Queen of England*'. However, the person *does* value *some* aspect of the life of a queen, namely the good aspects of it she is aware of (Dorsey, 2021, p. 127). If valuing something in general requires knowing what that thing is, then valuing a language also requires knowledge of it.

Consider now Samuel Scheffler's account of valuing, which states that to value a thing X involves at least four conditions:

- (1) A belief that X is good or valuable or worthy,
- (2) A susceptibility to experience a range of context-dependent emotions regarding X,
- (3) A disposition to experience these emotions as being merited or appropriate,
- (4) A disposition to treat certain kinds of X-related considerations as reasons for action in relevant deliberative contexts. (Scheffler, 2010, p. 29)

For example, Tim values his friendship with Maria, (1) if he believes that this friendship is good/valuable/worthy; (2) if he is susceptible to experience certain emotions as a result of this friendship, such as joy at hanging out

with Maria or disappointment if she betrays his trust; (3) if he regards these emotions as warranted, given his relationship with Maria; and (4) his friendship with Maria provides Tim with some *pro tanto* reasons for action, such as that he should attend her birthday party instead of going to the casino.

How about languages, if these are taken to be molecular facts? Someone can definitely have a belief that a language is valuable. After all, people believe in many wild things, such as that the Earth is flat or that Trump won the 2020 election. However, it is implausible to claim that a person can be vulnerable to a number of emotions regarding a language. Suppose an English speaker, who believes both that English is valuable and that French is a dreadful language, hears that French is to replace English as the official language in her country. One might expect her to feel angry, sad or disappointed upon hearing this. She will probably experience some emotion, but is this emotion directed towards the English language? No, for as we have seen, if factualism about languages is correct, people can only know a tiny fraction of a language. The English speaker may be angry that the tiny fraction of English she does know is no longer used in government, but she cannot be angry about anything regarding English as a whole. For the English language does not appear as the content of her mental representations, only those *parts* of English that she knows, do.

Moreover, there are no language-dependent reasons for action directed at individual agents. A part of a language may be associated with some reasons for action for individuals. For instance, if I like a particular inspirational phrase in English, I may have a reason to buy a mug with *that phrase* printed on it. But that does not show that I have any *English*-related reasons for action, because, again, English is merely the sum of its parts, according to factualism. To be sure, there might be language-related reasons for action directed at *collective agents*. A group of English academics might collectively fully grasp the whole nature of the English language and *this group* might have reasons to promote English. But none of this shows that each English academic individually has those reasons. Assuming that one has a reason to do something only if one can intentionally do that thing, it is unclear that what each individual academic intends when doing their respective parts towards achieving the overall goal is to promote English, as opposed to merely intending to do their respective actions. Some philosophers, such as John Searle, argue that individuals engaging in collective action each form intentions of the type 'We intend that X' (Searle, 1990, 1996 [1995], pp. 25–6). So a Searlean could, perhaps, say that each English academic has in their mind the intention 'We intend that we promote the English language'. However, Searle's argument is controversial (Roth, 2017) and thus any appeal to it rests on shaky grounds.

Now let us turn to a third account of valuing, advanced by Dale Dorsey. He summarises his position as follows:

I hold that to value something, at least for adult human beings, is a *cognitive* attitude. Actually, not just a cognitive attitude, but an *idealized* cognitive attitude. For me to properly value some state of affairs ϕ , say, is for me to possess the disposition to believe that ϕ would be good for me, under a range of idealized cognitive conditions. (Dorsey, 2021, p. 3)

For Dorsey, a theory of valuing needs to include at least two forms of idealization, which he calls ‘coherence’ and ‘consideration’. By *coherence*, he means that

a necessary condition for x to value ϕ is that x would take the relevant valuing attitude toward ϕ were x 's valuing attitudes rendered coherent. [...] [O]ne's evaluative beliefs should not offer inconsistent evaluative verdicts concerning individual bearers of intrinsic prudential value [i.e. well-being/welfare]. [...] For instance, I might hold the following two beliefs: ‘eating Julia Child's recipes is intrinsically good for me’ and ‘eating French food is intrinsically bad for me’. But this set of beliefs clearly issues inconsistent evaluative verdicts regarding the state in which I eat Julia Child's recipes given, of course, Julia Child's Gallic emphasis. (Dorsey, 2021, p. 144)

By *consideration*, Dorsey means that it's a necessary condition for x to value ϕ that x would take the relevant valuing attitude toward ϕ under conditions of *full consideration*, that is, full consideration of the relevant ways ϕ might be (Dorsey, 2021, p. 147). The ‘relevant ways ϕ might be’ are all the metaphysically possible ways ϕ might be (Dorsey, 2021, p. 150). He reaches this conclusion by giving the example of a person who takes the relevant pro-attitude to being the President of the United States based on some misconceptions of that role. However, if she discovered what the presidency actually entailed, she would not want it. Dorsey thinks that she thereby does not value the actual presidency but only an imagined version of it. For Dorsey, David Sobel is, therefore, right to say that one only values something if one continues to have the relevant valuing attitude in conditions of full information (Dorsey, 2021, pp. 149–50; Sobel, 1994, 2009). However, Dorsey contends, this full information condition only addresses how the world is, yet the actual world is only one way the world might be. A plausible theory of valuing cannot be limited to the actual world – it should accommodate all possible worlds. He illustrates the point thus:

Surely if we were to discover that, though I take a valuing attitude toward being the US President in every possible worlds *but* the one in which there are blue aliens on Alpha Centauri, though this may seem a possibility we needn't typically consider, it would *in fact* change our understanding of the construction of my genuine evaluative perspective. For whatever reason, I value only ‘non-blue-aliens-on-Alpha-Centauri Presidency.’ (Dorsey, 2021, p. 151)

Now supposing that Dorsey's account of valuing is correct, does it imply that one can value a language? That is, could I be disposed to believe that, say, English, would be good for me, if all my valuing attitudes were coherent and

I were fully informed about the nature of English in all possible worlds? I do not think so. While I could be disposed to believe that some parts of English are good for me, such as *that 'marriage' means both a union between a man and a woman and between members of the same sex*, I could not be disposed to believe that it is good for me *that 'of' means of or that the subject-verb-object word order is the dominant sentence structure in English*, for it is irrational to see such states as good for me. Given that English just is the aggregate of these and other facts, I cannot value English.

Theories of valuing + thingism about languages

Let us now turn to languages understood according to the thingist theory of Simon Evnine. On Dorsey's account of valuing, it seems absurd to claim that languages can be valued. In Evnine's view, recall, a language is not the same as its matter (i.e. its words, expressions and rules), given that its essence is determined by the prevailing ideology of a group of people. So if the ideology determines that the language is just the 1,000 words most frequently used by population X, then it is plausible to say that many people will know the language in the actual world. Thus, there is no concern here about people only knowing a tiny fraction of an enormous language. The real issue is with the fact that a language can vary wildly across time and different worlds. Consider the case of the US presidency given by Dorsey. Here it is assumed that the presidency remains more or less the same both across time in the actual world and in all other possible worlds. For example, it would be fair to assume that in a world in which there are blue aliens on Alpha Centauri, just like our actual world, the US president would not be elected by the citizens of China according to rules approved by the Swedish Parliament. It is a constitutive feature of the US presidency that the president be elected by US citizens according to the rules of the US Constitution. The essence of the US presidency is fixed by the initial act of creation – i.e. the creation of the US constitution by the Founders – just like the nature of a sculpture is determined by the initial act of creation by the artist.

The US presidency can change dramatically (just as a sculpture can have a completely different matter than its original one), and include innovations such as the inclusion of women and black people as eligible candidates and voters. But such innovations are only possible because they are still compatible with the intentions that were in place during the original act of creation. While artificial languages will be somewhat limited in their possible matter by the original act of creation of the linguist, natural languages are extremely fluid. A natural language can have completely different matter if the prevailing ideology says so. This means that a language can look different not only in different possible worlds but also in our actual world at different points in time. So the combination of

Dorsey's and Evinine's theories leads to the claim that a person only values a language if she would believe that it is good for her according to all the ways the language might be in all the worlds that might exist. This is astonishing. Surely, what the English speaker values is, at most, the English language at a time t_1 , held relatively fixed in both the actual and other possible worlds. She does not value *all* instantiations of the English language at times t_2 , t_{50} , t_{100} and so on. If I value contemporary English poetry, it is absurd to claim that I also value, right now, the poetry that will be produced in the year 4,000 by future English speakers.

But does it matter, for the purposes of moral and political philosophy, if what an individual values is a language at a time, instead of a language? Can a political liberal not, for example, just theorise about the former instead of the latter? I do not think this is a promising strategy, for two reasons. First, there is the fact that according to Evinine's account, there is nothing stopping an ideology from fixing the essence of a language in a very expansive way. Just as an ideology may determine that English only has 1,000 words, it could equally determine that it has 2 million, and so we would be back at the problem of people not being capable of valuing such a large and complex object. Second, the concept of a language at a time fails to capture a common motivation behind defences of the state promotion of particular languages, namely the alleged desire to promote languages understood as dynamic things. Although some individuals, such as members of the *Académie Française*, claim to be interested in promoting the French language as it has been up until now, others claim to value languages as fluid objects and not to want to see future language speakers tied to a fossilised language. So appealing to languages at times can, at best, only *partly* address the counter-intuitiveness of combining Dorsey's and Evinine's theories.

Now consider Lewis's and Scheffler's theories of valuing. The former argued that to value is to desire to desire while the latter maintained that it is, among other things, to be susceptible to experience a range of emotions. As we saw earlier, Lewis's theory does not accommodate the infelicity of expressions in ordinary language such as 'I desire (or desire to desire) the French language' or the sheer strangeness of desiring (or desiring to desire) languages. If we ignore these problems, and combine Lewis's account with Evinine's, the result will be that whether a language can be valued or not is highly contingent on the content of its underlying linguistic ideology. If, according to the ideology, English only has 1,000 words, it can be valued, but if it has 2 million, it cannot, for the reasons already discussed regarding the distinction between attitudes to parts and wholes. And a similar result is reached by combining Evinine's theory with Scheffler's. Although this combination seems to entail that it is plausible that someone can value a language, if the language is small and simple, it also seems to entail that one *cannot* value a language if it is large and complex.

Let me finish this section by observing the following: I suspect that when theorists talk about the state promoting languages that individuals value or care about, they are really referring to something else. Perhaps they have in mind a linguistic identity, an idiolect, an idealised language (along the lines of what Leonard Bloomfield and Ferdinand de Saussure proposed; see Chomsky, 1986, p. 16) or a language myth (much like national myths; see, e.g. Abizadeh, 2004). Whatever it is, it needs to be made explicit and not simply conflated with languages. Moreover, there would remain the problem of explaining how political liberalism is compatible with the state promotion of these alternative linguistic entities.

Conclusion

I have argued that moral and political philosophers should pay greater attention to the metaphysics of languages. Political liberals, in particular, need to explain how their assumption that languages exist is compatible with political liberalism, given that the existence and nature of languages are highly disputed and political liberalism is supposed to be neutral about metaphysical doctrines. Moreover, even if every member of a society accepted essentialism about languages, there would still be reasons to be sceptical that political liberalism can be reconciled with the state endorsement of languages.

Notes

1. See, e.g. Appiah (2005, pp. 101–5); Barry (2001, pp. 103–9, 215–20, 226–28, 324); Carens (2000, pp. 77–87); Carey (2022); Catala (2022); De Schutter and Ypi (2012); De Schutter (2017); Kymlicka (1995); Kymlicka and Patten (2003); Nowak (2020); Patten (2014, ch. 6); Peled and Bonotti (2016); Stilz (2009); Van Parijs (2011).
2. See also Abizadeh (2012, pp. 871–2, n. 9); Appiah (2005, ch. 4); Barry (2001, ch. 7); Benhabib (2002); Booth (2013); Church (2019); Gustavsson (2019); Lenard (2020, §1); Miller (1995, pp. 26–7); Moore (2019); Scheffler (2007).
3. This aphorism was popularised by Max Weinreich (Van Rooy, 2020, p. 1).
4. For further discussion of this reading of the argument and for a rebuttal, see Stainton (2016). For a recent Davidsonian account of linguistic communication see Begby (2016).
5. For a recent Chomsky-inspired argument against languages, see Rey (2020). For discussion, see Stainton and Viger (2022).
6. The view that there are abstract entities (such as numbers, sets or events) is controversial and, therefore, so is the claim that languages are instances of such entities. See Balaguer (2016); Rodriguez-Pereyra (2019).
7. Here I follow Armstrong (1997, p. 4) in distinguishing between ‘factualist’ and ‘thingist’ ontologies.
8. Factualism is proposed by Wittgenstein (2001 [1921]), but the most influential recent account of it is found in Armstrong (1997). Here I follow

Armstrong in using ‘facts’ and ‘states of affairs’ interchangeably. I also follow him in using ‘facts’/‘states of affairs’ to refer exclusively to those facts/states of affairs that exist *and* obtain. For some philosophers, a state of affairs can exist without obtaining. For example, the state of affairs *Socrates’s hating philosophical discussions* exists but it never obtained, because Socrates actually liked talking about philosophy. For a discussion of states of affairs that do *not* obtain, see Textor (2021). For a discussion of states of affairs that *do* obtain, see Mulligan and Correia (2021). Another helpful recent examination of the topic can be found in Jago (2018, ch. 4). Factualism is also prominent in contemporary social ontology, particularly in the work of John Searle (e.g. Searle, 1996 [1995], 2010, 2014). However, although he presupposes a factualist ontology, Searle does not explore it in any depth (Hansson Wahlberg, 2021, p. 5839). His main concern is to defend the existence of institutional facts, and not to analyse facts themselves. For the purposes of this article, all that is needed is an account of facts *simpliciter*, as opposed to institutional facts.

9. Note that he is not talking about how human beings first came to engage in linguistic communication, but rather about the languages that emerge in the context of pre-existing linguistic practices (Evnine, 2016, pp. 148–9).
10. This definition thus matches the one accepted by many scholars of ideology, namely that ideology is a ‘concept that describes some manner of patterned and politically oriented belief system’ (Leader Maynard & Mildenerger, 2018, p. 567).
11. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the two points in this paragraph.
12. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

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Notes on contributor

Renan Silva is a PhD candidate in political theory in the Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy and International Relations at the Central European University. His research focuses on political philosophy, philosophy of social science and social ontology.

ORCID

Renan Silva  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4788-3096>

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