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Books: Searle, J. R. (1983). *Intentionality*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Articles: Searle, J. R. (1985). *Intentionality and the Philosophy of Language*. *Journal of Philosophy*, 82(1), 1-17.



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Book Review

Fritz Mauthner : *Die Sprache*

Rainer Ebert*

"In science, language reveals its impotence; in poetry, it shows the power of its beauty; in religion, we are tyrannized by the power of language [...]."
(*Die Sprache*, p. 19)

Fritz Mauthner was born in the Kingdom of Bohemia in 1849, in the city of Hořice that is now a part of the Czech Republic. His three-volume *Contributions to a Critique of Language* (1901-1902) are symptomatic of the linguistic turn that began to transform philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century and shaped much of the discipline in the century that followed. In 1907, Mauthner published *Die Sprache (Language)* which reiterates – in concentrated form – some of the main ideas of his *Contributions* and shows their relevance to scientific, philosophical, religious and socio-political thought.

Mauthner is a radical skeptic: He holds that knowledge is impossible, arguably the most ambitious thesis of *Die Sprache*. Mauthner argues that mathematics and other purely intellectual disciplines are wholly hypothetical (pp. 28 f.); they cannot reach beyond the definitions from which they start. Mathematical inferences no more increase our knowledge than these very definitions. Quickly rejecting the idea of *a priori* knowledge, Mauthner focuses almost entirely on the possibility of empirical knowledge. His skepticism is firmly rooted in his critique of language. He sees us as judges who know nothing except the court files. Words are all we have; what is not in language is not in the world (cf. p. 86). Hence, if we were to know at all, we would have to know through language. However, while well adapted to poetry, language is pathetic, deplorable and utterly useless as a tool to obtain knowledge (cf. pp. 84, 108). Even worse – language holds a tyrannical grip on our thought and leads us to accept beliefs that are false at best and politically dangerous at worst.

Empedocles famously first described the four Greek classical elements. Attempting to explain both change and stability in nature, he

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postulated *νεικος* (*strife*) and *φιλια* (*love*), forces Empedocles imagined to act between the elements. A scientific hypothesis back then, it seems obvious to us today that “νεικος” and “φιλια” are anthropomorphic, mere metaphors drawing an incomplete and misleading picture of the world. Mauthner’s anti-metaphysical program is characterized by the attempt to show that *all* words – including the refined ones used in philosophy and science – are metaphorical, every bit as much as “νεικος” and “φιλια”.

Mauthner’s case for word-skepticism starts with a critical account of human experience. He holds that what we perceive through the senses is contingent on our attention, interests and needs, and consequently calls our senses *Zufallssinne* (contingent senses). Sensations reflect what is useful. Usefulness, however, does not imply accuracy, Mauthner notes. He then goes on to insist that our senses provide us with a picture of the world that is not only incomplete but distorted, contrary to the common belief that the evolutionary purpose of our senses vouches for their accuracy. Mauthner would have been well advised to replicate the gist of his argument for this central point developed more thoroughly in his *Contributions*. Since he fails to do so on this and other occasions, the reader unfamiliar with his other works will be left puzzled at times.

We take another step away from reality when we translate our sensations into language. In this process, something is always lost. Nature is too subtle to be captured by the crude claws of language (cf. p. 19). Far from being an adequate picture of the world, as Ludwig Wittgenstein will argue later (cf. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.021), language is metaphorical at best. Since Mauthner conceives reality as adjectival and essentially qualitative (p. 112), he finds it particularly problematic when we introduce nouns to describe our experiences. Mauthner argues that errors and confusions in science and philosophy, and sometimes also socio-political evil, arise when one mistakes nouns for names of things. Metaphysics is rooted in *Wortaberglauben* (word-superstition), the unwarranted assertion that there are entities corresponding to the properties that are given to us in the senses.

As words wander through the centuries, they find their way into other cultures as calques and loanwords (pp. 56 ff.) and move even further away from reality. All words are rooted in metaphors, or in metaphors of metaphors (p. 109); they are always in *statu nascendi*. Examples for such ghostly words that misguide the superstitious are “substance”, “object” (pp. 66 ff.) and “morality” (pp. 20 ff., 92) in philosophy, “psyche” (pp. 7 ff.), “affinity” (pp. 29 f.) and “element” (pp. 62 ff.) in science, “god” in religion, and “race” and “state” in politics.

Fritz Mauthner : *Die Sprache*

Critique of language is liberation from word-superstition, the effort to uncover the influence that grammar has on metaphysics and to set limits to what should reasonably be said. Once we trace back the word "soul", for example, to its origin and understand the psychological conditions under which it emerged, we see that the postulation of the soul as an external entity was not warranted. "Soul" is just a word, nothing real corresponds. There is also no such *thing* as language. Language is a human activity, very much like a game, reflecting the collective memory of sensations. Likewise, there are no laws of nature. "Laws of nature" is a metaphor that has its origin in ancient myths about divine law-makers. Etc. Reality cannot in principle be known by means of language. A substantial world view is impossible. It is the task of philosophy to help us unlearn our habit to talk substantively when doing philosophy or science.

Of course, Mauthner's critique of language ultimately must also apply to his own work insofar it purports to convey knowledge. "What a redemptive act would it be if the critique of language could be carried out with the quietly despairing suicide of thinking or speaking" (p. 120), Mauthner laments over the necessity to use words in his work. Consequently, he ends with surrender to the tyranny of language and a call for silence – anticipatory of Wittgenstein (cf. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6), yet more comprehensive.

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