DISCUSSION

PROFESSOR RYLE’S USE OF “USE” AND “USAGE”

Many philosophers have told us lately that their main interest is in the confusions which arise out of the use and misuse of ordinary language. And some of us have been puzzled because these philosophers have neither employed the methods nor referred to the conclusions of professional philologists. Professor Ryle in his article on “Ordinary Language”¹ (Philosophical Review, April, 1953) assures us that we were puzzled only because we misinterpreted the phrase “the use of ordinary language,” reading it as if it were a paraphrase of “ordinary linguistic usage,” whereas in fact the ordinary-language philosopher is interested only in use, not at all in usage. “Use” Ryle defines as “the method of employment of an expression” and “usage” as “the prevalence or unprevalence of this method of employment.” Discoveries about usage, he says, are irrelevant to discussions of use; the philosopher’s inquiry into use “does not require and is not usually helped by” the philologist’s inquiry into usage. What I wish to suggest in reply is that “the use (or method of employment) of an expression” is a misleading paraphrase of “a prevailing way of employing an expression,” and that, in consequence, to inquire into use is to study usages.

Let us begin from Ryle’s own way of making the distinction. I am not sure whether, in distinguishing between “use” and “usage,” he is intending to do philosophy, or is having a philological holiday. But I am quite sure that in fact he is philologizing, and in an improperly amateurish sort of way; if I can make good that point, this will suggest that ordinary-language philosophers at least sometimes, even if in their lighter moments, engage in philology and ought to do so with more careful consideration of the evidence.

Ryle writes:

Lots of philosophers, whose dominant good resolution is to discern logico-linguistic difficulties, talk without qualms as if “use” and “usage” were synonyms. This is just a howler; for which there is little excuse except

¹ I should perhaps explain that I have a very great admiration for Ryle’s contributions to philosophy. But I also think that they are obscured by his adoption of the fashionable talk about “ordinary language,” just as Hume’s contributions are obscured by his then-fashionable talk about “ideas.”
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that in the archaic phrase "use and want," "use" could perhaps be replaced by "usage"; that "used to" does mean "accustomed to"; and that to be hardly used is to suffer hard usage.

I call this "amateurish" for two reasons: first, the word "synonym" is used very carelessly and, secondly, the cases which Ryle mentions are not the important ones and have not been brought together after a careful study of the available evidence.

I very much doubt—and Ryle provides no quotations to prove the contrary—whether anyone has ever supposed that "use" and "usage" are synonymous in the strict sense, has thought that in every sentence in which "use" appears, the word "usage" could be substituted without loss of effect, and vice versa. Ryle, it might seem, is using the word "synonym" in a loose sense, in which synonyms, to quote Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, are "words either of which in one or other of its acceptations can sometimes be substituted for the other without affecting the meaning of the sentence." But in this sense of "synonym," "use" and "usage" are synonyms; the *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes several sentences in which "use" could be substituted for "usage" without any loss of meaning.

Perhaps Ryle is using the word "synonym" in a looser sense still; perhaps in saying that "use" and "usage" are not synonyms, he means merely that there is a set of sentences within which philosophers have wrongly supposed that "usage" could be substituted for "use." I do not then know what these sentences would be. At the beginning of his article, Ryle refers to the confusion between the phrases "the use of ordinary language" and "ordinary linguistic usage," and I take it that it is about this alleged confusion that the whole article, in one way or another, is meant to turn. But does any philosopher imagine that "use" could be replaced by "usage" and "usage" by "use" in these phrases?

"You're being pedantic, old-maidish, picking on trifles." But surely if we philosophers are going to spend our time considering whether words like "use" and "usage" are synonymous, we can reasonably be expected to do it properly. Ryle's extraordinary confidence that he knows what is a "howler" and what isn't contrasts very oddly with the delicacy of a philologist's discussion of synonyms. The "high priori road" is not yet dead in Oxford, after all.

Ryle makes another characteristic remark in support of his case: there cannot be a misusage, he says, whereas there can be a misuse, and this helps us to see how different a usage is from a use. On the linguistic point, Ryle is wrong. The word "misusage" is uncommon but not unknown. Poe talks about "the misusage of 'like' for 'as'";
I do not have the least difficulty in understanding this sentence. But suppose Ryle were right, would anything follow? There might be all sorts of reasons why we do not use the word “misusage”—reasons of euphony, for example. We say “mistrust” but not “mis-confidence,” “misdeed” but not “mis-act”; it does not follow that “trust” and “confidence,” “act” and “deed,” are in no context synonymous.

Ryle, then, certainly has not shown that, in the contexts which interest him, phrases containing “use” cannot be paraphrased by phrases containing “usage.” And meanwhile he has somewhat shaken our belief in his capacity to talk accurately about our language. (Perhaps my own discussion is not entirely accurate, but then I do not think I am competent to describe “the employment of expressions”—I have to rely on my dictionaries.) Now let us look more directly at what Ryle says about “use” and “usage.”

He begins in a manner which prepares us for a sharp contrast. A “use,” he says, “is a way of operating with something,” whereas a usage is “a custom, practice, fashion, or vogue.” But he cannot mean this to be a contrast, although he does use phrases like “in contrast.” For the practice of eating peas with a knife or the custom of eating them with a fork is each of them “a way of operating with something.” Another way of making the distinction brings us to the heart of the matter: a use, Ryle says, is a way of doing something, a usage is a more or less prevailing practice of doing that thing.

One hesitates at this point, because “usage” sometimes does not mean prevailing practice but rather best practice, or the practice of the best practitioners. Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* does not tell us that the practice prevails of using “disinterested” as if it were synonymous with “uninterested” or of using “seen” as the past tense of “see”; it tells us how the best writers use English.

But if it is odd that Ryle does not notice this sense of “usage,” it is even odder that he uses “use” as if that meant proper use, and even “way of operating” as if that meant “good or effective way of operating.”

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2 Ryle should pay heed to Alice James’s remark: “You can absolutely assert what an Englishman has said—it satisfies his highest craving to crib, cabin and confine his fancies within a dozen or so locutions . . . —but how could one deny that this or that had been said by a Yankee?” Even then, what is here said of “Englishmen” applies only to the Englishmen of a particular class or time, who have had “correct usage” beaten into them.

3 I should make it clear that I am not myself trying to give a full account of the ordinary way of using “usage”; the practice of shaving with a razor blade is not, I think, ordinarily called a “usage.” If anybody thinks I am being “very particular” in this article, he is quite wrong.
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He says, for example, that “a way of operating with a razor-blade . . . is a technique, knack or method.” But although I have sometimes operated with a razor blade, people would certainly say of me that I haven’t “the knack, technique, or method.” They would be right, according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, for a knack is an adroit way of operating, a technique is a skillful way of operating, and a method is a systematic way of operating. To put the point briefly, a knack, technique, or method is an effective procedure.

Nevertheless, Ryle is describing his own usage accurately, I should say, when he identifies “use” or “employment” with “technique.” He talks, for example, of “the employment of a boomerang” in such a way that the use of a boomerang as a coat hanger or as a nulla-nulla would not count as “employment”: he means “the proper or right use” of a boomerang, the use of it in accordance with what the Socrates of the Republic would call its “function.”

Yet as soon as we interpret “use” in this way, it becomes fairly clear (unless we are whole-hearted Platonists) that to determine the use we have to inquire into usage. We want to know whether a person can “use a boomerang.” We ask whether he can effectively carry out the performances which we customarily expect of boomerang users. The answer: “Of course, he can use a boomerang. He made me a lovely coat hanger out of one,” would not be the sort of answer we want, because we mean by “use” a “usage-use.” Or we want to know whether a person knows how to “use a knife and fork”: we consider whether his performances are in accordance with those approved by the social arbiters of our group. And similarly to find out whether a person “knows how to use the word ‘synonym’” we shall have to ask ourselves whether he conforms to the practice of the people who, in our opinion, speak “good English,” which implies that we first of all inquire into the usage and then compare with it the “ways of operating” of this particular person.

This is just the conclusion Ryle wants to avoid. “Learning,” he says, “is learning how to do a thing, it is not finding out sociological generalities, not even sociological generalities about other people who do similar or different things.” And, of course, this is perfectly true. Learning to shave is one thing, reading books about “How the Trobriand Islander Uses Razor Blades” is quite another thing. We can adopt a usage—conform to it—without being able to describe it. But the ordinary-language philosopher doesn’t want merely to use words, he wants to be able to talk about “use.” How is he to “describe the stock
Ryle's answer is that he does not need to study usage. The philosopher already knows "the stock use," as a result of a number of salutary corrective processes "in the nursery" and in the later stages of his education. But this is true only in the sense that the philosopher ordinarily knows how to use a word in its more common contexts, or how to give a rough indication of its meaning to a foreigner. That is very different from the really accurate knowledge of nuances needed for a serious discussion even of "the stock use"; Ryle's nurse, to point my case, apparently did not know there was such a word as "misusage" and his best friends had never told him that one really must be careful in using the word "synonym."

Ryle simplifies the situation for himself by his curious account of "stock uses." He draws attention to words like "of," "have," "object," which, he says, have no stock use, and then to another class of words of which he says that they have both a stock and a nonstock use, the nonstock uses being "metaphorical, hyperbolical, poetical, stretched and deliberately restricted" uses of the word. But a great many English words—perhaps most—have various "stock uses"; a word like "pitch," for example, is not in the least like "of," and yet we could not possibly pick out one way of using it and distinguish it as "the stock use." Similarly, Ryle's remark that "Hume's question . . . was about the use of 'cause' " oversimplifies the situation. For Hume was not interested in that way of using the word "cause" in which it means "object of devotion"; and yet any discussion of "the use of 'cause' " (am I wrong in thinking that this is a very odd phrase?) would need to refer to this stock employment.

It might be supposed that we could easily overcome this difficulty by a minor amendment. Take the case of "pitch": we might say "I am going to talk about the use of 'pitch,' in the sense in which it means that black stuff with which you are all familiar." But it would at once be clear that this was a roundabout way of saying "I am going to talk about that black stuff called 'pitch' with which you are all familiar." Similarly, I would suggest, if we have to say, "I am going to talk about the use of 'cause' in the sense in which it means (let us say) sufficient

It might be amusing, perhaps even instructive, to compare Ryle on ordinary language with W. D. Ross on prima facie duties. There is a close resemblance between Oxford deontology and Oxford linguisticism, not least in the assumption that duties, like verbal habits, are "learnt in the nursery," and that what nurse has told us, goes for the rest of the world, too.
and necessary condition," it at once becomes clear that we are talking about necessary and sufficient conditions—the gilt is off the linguistic gingerbread. The vague phrase "the use of 'cause'" makes it look as if one can have a discussion which is purely about "expressions"; but if we try to distinguish "stock uses" of words, we are soon driven into talking about the situations to which our expressions refer.

Ryle oversimplifies in another respect, by exaggerating the degree to which English usage is uniform. Classically educated Oxford men notoriously treat the English language as if it were (or ought to be) a dead language, with Oxford usages serving as the Ciceronian model. But once that superstition has been abandoned, and it has been abandoned by every competent philologist, we are quite prepared to find that usages vary greatly from place to place and time to time; and that in consequence what we describe as "the use" of an expression—assuming that this queer locution is ever in our mouths—is very likely to be nothing more than the usage of our friends. Ryle won't have it that there can be experts on "the use" of words. "Either a person knows or he does not know how to use them." This is true only in the sense that either a person knows or does not know how to drive a car: we can know what to do in most situations in which we have to use a certain expression without being at all sure of ourselves in more unusual or out-of-the-way situations. And that highly unusual case in which we are discussing ordinary language is just the case in which we most easily go astray and stand most in need of the help of linguistic experts, who will help us to see that our own usage is not necessarily "the use."

Suppose we forget the idea that a philosopher is bound, or even likely, to have a really thorough acquaintance with "the stock use" of an expression. Ought he to go off and acquire it? If Ryle is right in thinking that Hume is concerned with "the use of 'cause,'" he certainly ought to; that is the main point I have wanted to make in this note. But I am not at all convinced myself that philological questions are of any special importance to the philosopher.

Ryle approaches the matter as if we had a choice between two views: either Hume is examining "the concept of causality" or he is studying "the use of 'cause.'" And if these were the alternatives, we should certainly find it hard to make up our mind. For both suffer from the same defect. "The concept of causality" is a misleadingly abstract way of referring to "what some people think about causes"; "the use of 'cause'" is an equally misleading way of referring to "how some people use the word 'cause'"—the first belongs to the climate of
British empiricism which tried to treat logical questions as if they were psychological, the second to the climate of British grammaticism which tries to treat logical questions as if they were linguistic. In either case the word “the”—“the concept, the use”—is meant to mitigate the horrors of a straight-out reduction of philosophy to another subject, psychology or philology. But couldn’t we just talk about causes?

There is a great deal more that might be said about Ryle’s article. I shall merely refer to two small points which have a bearing on my general theme. Ryle says that we can sensibly ask whether a person knows how to use a certain word or phrase but not whether he knows how to use a certain sentence, because words or phrases have a stock use whereas sentences have not. I think that what he wants to say here is correct and important. But on the “stock use” of “sentence” amongst grammarians, who might reasonably be regarded as the experts in using this word, what Ryle says is quite wrong. For “thank you” and “excuse me” are sentences, and yet they have a stock use. Ryle seems to be misusing the word “sentence.”

A final point, on philosophical terminology. “We have had to learn in the hard school of daily life how to deploy the word ‘know’ and we have had to learn at the bridge-table how to deploy the word ‘revoke.’ There is no such hard school in which to learn how to deploy the words ‘cognize’ and ‘sense.’ ” But there is such a hard school, a thorough understanding of the history of philosophy. It is scarcely fair never to go to school and then to complain about the teaching.

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