The Meaning of Life and the Meaning of Words: The Works of I.A. Richards.[1]

"The proper study of mankind"
  Could be
  This proper realm to free
   By ridding it,
   Day by hour by minute,
Of what deforms a mind.

Richards, 'General Election'.

Throughout his work, Richards' standpoint is that philosophy is never separable from life; and his concern is with communication. This being so, it is easy to understand the wide range of his interests, for philosophy, poetry, criticism, education, psychology and religion are all subjects with something to contribute to the problems Richards has chosen to deal with:

> Criticism, as I understand it, is the endeavour to discriminate between experiences and to evaluate them. We cannot do this without some understanding of the nature of experience, or without theories of valuation and communication. Such principles as apply in criticism must be taken from these more fundamental studies. 1967a, vii-viii.[2]

His standpoint (that philosophy is an act of living) and his main concern (with communication) are of course logically interdependent, but they are analytically separable.

The position that philosophy and life are inseparable is by no means fully developed in the earlier works. In The Meaning of Meaning, Principles, Science and Poetry, and Practical Criticism it is poetry, rather than philosophy, which is to be the saviour of the world (see Schiller, Chapter 5). As he was confronted with more and more examples and types of misunderstanding (in academic debate, in education, and in politics, as well as in literary criticism), Richards became aware of the need to broaden his earlier formulation. By the early thirties it had become language, and the philosophy of language, which was our failing and our only hope of salvation (see Mencius p.35 and Coleridge p.xi). The formulation was completed by the second half of the thirties in Rhetoric and Interpretation:

> Words are not a medium in which to copy life. Their true work is to restore life itself to order. 1965, 134 (see also p.136).
> A deeper and more thorough study of our use of words is at every point a study of our ways of living. 1973, ix (see also p.5),

and the same sentiments are maintained in the later works:

> Language is an instrument for controlling our becoming. 1955, 9.

This view of the world is interdependent with Richards' notion of value. The relationship between value and criticism is too large a question to enter into here. Suffice it to say that Richards' position

(which is expounded in Principles, especially the Preface, and which is only slightly modified throughout his work) is that criticism and life both entail judgements, and that our judgements depend upon our valuations. Richards would, however, be the first to admit that the shifts in the word 'value' here cause immense problems.

Richards' concern with communication has been worked out by dealing with the problems of human misunderstanding in all its many guises. Taking The Meaning of Meaning as a general theory of the problems of understanding and meaning, the later works can all be seen as to some extent specializations to deal with the various aspects of those problems. Principles, Science and Poetry, and Practical Criticism each deals with the problem of literary, and in particular poetic, meaning. Mencius is concerned with the problem of communication between languages, Coleridge again with literary meaning, Rhetoric with meaning in ordinary speech, Interpretation with understanding in speech and reading, the works on Basic English with the problems of translation, both in learning a foreign language and within a language, the poetry with communicating feelings and emotions.

The central problem in all this is the opposition between a monosemic and a solipsistic view of language. A monosemic view argues that (or finds it more profitable to act as though) words carry fixed meanings pre-assigned to them. A solipsistic theory argues that we, as speakers, writers, hearers and readers, give words their meanings, the words themselves being no more than fluid masses of associations. In which case, it is hard to know whether we communicate with each other at all, since our meanings for the same utterance may differ; moreover, we can make no judgements on language since the traditional criteria of value disappear.

This conflict is closely parallel to many other oppositions which have been drawn both inside philosophy and outside it: for example Aristotelianism/Platonism. In particular it is related to the opposition between positivism (with its ally scientism) and idealism. It is impossible for a positivist to adopt a solipsistic position, or for an idealist to hold a monosemic view of language.

Much has been talked and written of Richards' early scientism. The Meaning of Meaning and Principles are probably his most widely read books, and it is in these that Richards often offers a psychologism of the crudest kind, for which he has been rightly criticised. But to some extent this criticism has been unkind to Richards, for from his later works, and what he says in them about his earlier ones, it appears that the critics have over-reified some of his conceptualisations. What were taken to be descriptions of how the mind works turn out, on a more sympathetic reading, to be instead no more than ways to help us imagine, conceptualise, and deal with thought. Whether the fault for this lies with Richards' writing or the critics' reading is, for my purposes, irrelevant. The fact remains that, taken in conjunction with his later writings, the earlier ones are far less rigidly positivist than has been suggested.

This can also be justified to a certain extent by a close reading of th earlier works themselves; Richards may never explicitly state that his psychological images are no more than tools to think with rather than things to think about, but he comes close to it. One can certainly find many indications of a bias against positivism and monosemy, which surely argue against any charge of scientism. To take just one example from each of the earlier works:

> We ought to regard communication as a difficult matter, and close correspondence of reference for different thinkers as a comparatively rare event. 1972, 123.
> A single word by itself, let us say 'night', will raise almost as many different thoughts and feelings as there are persons who hear it. 1967a, 4.
> What an individual responds to is not the whole situation but a selection from it, and as a rule few people make the same selection. 1970, 37.
> The reception (or interpretation) of a meaning is an activity, which may go astray; in fact, there is always some degree of loss and distortion in transmission. 1964, 180.

These statements hold an incipient, if not an explicit, leaning towards solipsism, which develops in the later works into an almost purely idealist position.

Richards has not, however, spent all his time arguing for a purely solipsistic view of language; outright solipsism is as unsatisfactory a philosophy of language as outright monosemy. It is hard for us to conceptualise any answer other than these two to the question 'How does meaning work?' and I suspect that, as far as philosophy is concerned, there is none. There may be no answer within the terms of logic, but for practical purposes we need one, and most individuals have no trouble finding one. Richards' workcan be seen as a working out of just this progression: from a practical problem (misunderstanding), through a philosophical investigation, to a practical solution.

The practical solution which Richards offers has the merits of (comparative) simplicity, and some of the advantages of each of the opposed positions. Its disadvantage, which it shares with all other proposed working theories, is that if we investigate it at all closely, if we try to make it do more than it was designed for, it proves to contain the faults of both opposed views - an unrealistic fixity of language on the one hand, and an exaggeration of our failure to communicate on the other.

Richards' compromise, although it develops through his writings, is in essence that provided by the context theory of meaning he first expounded in The Meaning of Meaning. This allows words to be fluid in their meaning, yet provides for their specification by their context. By 'context' here Richards claims to mean something other than a word's setting in a sentence (or a piece of discourse of any other size). Rather he takes it to mean the way in which a word assigns its referent to a class: the other occasions on which it has been used, the occasions on which it has not been used, and so on. In other words, the history of that word for the individual concerned (see The Meaning of Meaning, pp. 52-59). Unfortunately, Richards' use of 'context' in this specialized sense is not as consistent as one might have hoped. This is probably because either sense of the word causes problems for the general theory: the 'setting' sense suggests a position close to the Usage theory of meaning, of which Richards is rightly scornful, calling it,

> On the whole, the most pernicious influence in current English teaching, doing more than all other removable errors together to inhibit the course of self-critical and profitable reflection about the conduct of thought in language. 1973, 174.

On the other hand, the 'historical' sense of context leads straight back into solipsism, for each individual's history of any word will differ.

These are not the only contradictions to be found in Richards' later works; but contradictions are to be expected in the attempted compromise of incompatible positions. Richards is aware of this as he shows by the limitations he is always ready to put on his theories:

> In thinking about how we think, our aim must be to perceive as distinctly as possible what we are doing rather than to arrive at any final-looking positive theories. As we do so a great number of theories that are too crude to sustain the examination and have only at a distance been supposed to apply, are discarded; and to be rid of them is a great gain. We may be left without any theory, but we are at least freed from the interferences of mishandled abstractions. 1973, 249.

Although we can arrive at no final logical solution to the question 'How do we mean?' it is still necessary to ask the question, lest a false and over-rigid view of the nature of language distort our view of its meanings. Richards is constantly reminding us, as we must constantly remind ourselves, that

> We shall do better to think of a meaning as though it were a plant that has grown - not a can that has been filled or a lump of clay that has been moulded. 1965, 12.

Martin Cantor.

Notes

1. This article was prompted by the issue of a second edition of Interpretation in Teaching 1973, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, £5. I consider Interpretation to be Richards' best work, for it contains almost all the major points which he makes elsewhere, in their most coherent formulation.

2. All references are to works by Richards (or in one case Ogden and Richards) unless otherwise stated.

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