A NOTE ON THE MEANINGS OF 'FORM'*

Where to draw the line is always a ticklish question; whether to draw a line at all is even more so. One such pair of questions that is currently facing philosophers (ever since they got interested in looking for the linguistic foundations of their enterprise) and more recently, linguists (ever since they got interested in looking for the philosophical foundations of their job) is the pair that concerns the analysis of the meaning or meanings of a word/term and of a sentence/statement. The philosopher's worry is lest his activity degenerate into the giving of "tedious and inaccurate supplements to [H. W. Fowler's] *Modern English Usage*, instead of philosophical discussion of a 'way of using a word' which could be found in many languages" (Geach 1957 : p. 16). The linguist is equally anxious that his concern for the analysis of meaning does not degenerate into amateurish philosophizing. It is far from the intention of this note to offer (or even suggest) answers to the pair of questions that one could ask about this particular boundary line. It has set itself a much more modest job to set the philosopher right about his notion of what a linguist (a lexicographer, to be more specific) is expected by his fellow professionals (and I mean professionals and not amateurs) to accomplish in writing a dictionary entry or rather in writing the right half of a dictionary entry. It is always helpful to know just how green the grass on the other side is.

In writing the right half of a dictionary entry the lexicographer could be doing one or more of several things : he could be offering illustrative examples, he could frame stage directions for or descriptions of the use of the term, he could list some equivalent expressions that can readily be substituted, and, finally, he could formulate a definition that reports on the existing interpretation. These four alternatives, namely, examples, usage notes, ready equivalents, and reportive definitions can be regarded both as mutually complementary and as muturally substitutive. Thus while *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (1969) says about the word "*yes .... adv*" that it is

" used as a function word to express assent or agreement < are you ready ? *Yes*, I am > "

(i.e. usage note followed by an example) and—

" used as a function word to indicate uncertainty or polite interest or attentiveness "

(usage note) among other things. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (5th edition, 1964) has the following to say about " *yes* particle equivalent to affirmative sentence "—

" The answer to your question is affirmative, it is as you say or as I have said, your request or command will be complied with, the statement made or course intended is correct or satisfactory "

(reportive definitions as also some ready equivalents) and—

" (in answer to summons or address) I am here, I hear or am attending to you, (*yes* ? What more have you to say ?) "

(*usage* note, ready equivalent, and example) among other things.

Out of these four there is no danger that the giving of examples or ready equivalents will ever be confused with any kind of philosophical activity. The questions about the drawing of boundary lines (whether, where) arise only in the case of reportive definitions and usage notes, and not with the other two.

Where does a competently formulated reportive definition in a dictionary end and a piece of conceptual analysis begin ? And where does a competently framed usage note in a dictionary end and a piece of usage analysis, i.e. analysis of the conditions for the felicitous use of an expression begin ? In this note we shall confine our attention to the former pair. (Reportive definitions by linguists need not be illustrated from actual dictionaries, they could also be drawn from pieces of meaning analysis carried out by linguists.) Here is a sample of linguists' efforts :

(i) *walk* ..v.. (Of men) progress by advancing each foot alternately never having both off ground at once .. (of animals) go with slowest gait corresponding to human walk .. (from *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*).

(ii) *run* ..v.. (Of men) progress by advancing each foot alternately never having both on ground at once .. (of animals) go at quicker than walking pace, amble, trot, canter, gallop, etc. (from the same source; amble, trot, etc. are *not* ready equivalents, but species of running).

(iii) *cousin* one's consanguineal of the higher-than-first degree of collaterality (source : recent discussions in anthropological linguistics[1])

While none of these terms are of the kind that is of philosophical interest, their definitions are certainly analytical in character. Comparing the definitions of *walk* and *run*, for example, one can easily separate the common genus and the differentiating characteristics. Here are some verbs that are likely to be of philosophical interest (Fillmore 1969) :

(iv) *accuse* say as a judge to the addressee that someone is responsible for something presupposed to be bad :
A (the judge) accuses B (the one accused) of X (something bad)

(v) *credit* think as a judge that someone is responsible for something presupposed to be good :
A (the judge) credited B (the one credited) with X (something good).

In the same vein one can define *excuse*, *exonerate* and *forgive* so as to distinguish between them. It is true that the author of the definitions cited is a linguist who acknowledges his debt to the philosopher Austin.

The reason for assembling this sample is to suggest that the difference between the lexicographer's reportive definitions and the philosopher's conceptual analysis may not lie in that the linguist and the philosopher are performing analyses different in kind or in that the two are analysing entities of different kinds. Rather the two have different ends in view—the linguist is intent on bringing out what is characteristic of a given language, the philosopher is interested in what is common to a large number of languages if not to all of them regardless of their difference from one another.

Let us now turn our attention to the noun *form* in English. In so doing we shall ignore what is likely to turn out to be parochial in one way or the other. The sense of *form* ' class of school pupils in the same year ' is confined to British secondary schools (especially grammar and public schools) and some American private schools. The sense ' body of printed matter secured for printing in one impression ' is confined to the printer's trade.

The sense 'resting place of a hare' is not likely to be matched in other European languages. Even after these and other exclusions, the noun is still left with many senses. I propose to arrange and define these senses. The arrangement has no claim to being historical, though sense 1 is probably the oldest. The definitions will bring out the significance of the arrangement—there seems to be some kind of progression from one sense to the next. In most of these senses the noun *form* is traditionally opposed to some other noun—thus, the pairs *form—matter* and *form—spirit* point to quite different senses. We shall not say anything at this stage about the philosopher's uses of the noun *form*.

(1) Visible, distant aspect such as shape, size, arrangement of parts, colour, light-and-shade, surface texture *as opposed to* body, tactile, proximate aspect such as weight, feel, inner texture.

Examples : He has a well-proportioned face and form. The demon took the form of a tiger. It is without shape or form.

(2) Visible linear aspect such as shape, size, arrangement of parts *as opposed to* the rest of the visible aspect such as colour, light-and-shade, surface texture.

Examples : I saw a dark form moving in the mist. Can you see the form of an elephant in those clouds ?

(3) Shape and arrangement of parts, formal cause (pattern, structure, design, scheme) underlying a concrete object, especially a made object, or a concrete piece of activity *as opposed to* material, substance, matter, that which is shaped and arranged, material cause.

Examples : Gold was imported in the form of bars, chips, and ornaments. Both the arguments have the same logical form, though at the material level one is about the mortality of Socrates and the other is about lying Cretans. A letter of introduction was written in due form. Ancient forms are observed at the coronation. The same subject-matter can be offered in different forms. I brought some blank entry forms (American : I brought some entry blanks).

(4) Palpable effect of a formal cause,actual manifestation with its shape, arrangement of parts, even material *as opposed to* the underlying final cause (function, purpose, intent, content, meaning) and/or efficient cause (spirit, energy).

Examples : Ice and steam are both forms of water. The indefinite article in French has three forms : *le*, *la*, *les*. In synonymy different forms have the same meaning. Don't do it for form's sake : you must mean it. Tax evasion is a form of dishonesty. Democracy is a form of government; parliamentary democracy is a form of democracy. Forms of worship. Asking you to stay for dinner is common form among them; don't take such an invitation too seriously. This is a subtle form of insult. Revenge has taken this strange form.

In all the four senses of *form* presented so far form is opposed to something else that is known less readily, that is less immediately accessible. In the fourth sense the less accessible is also the more abstract. Also there are certain relationships. The second sense can be seen as the first sense specialized in one direction. The third sense can be seen as the second sense generalized beyond the visual domain.

(5) That which yields or informs the formal and material effect, the ability to perform, essence, spirit, idea, life *as opposed to* matter, body, the actual manifestation.

Examples : The horse/athlete is in form/is out of form/ has lost his form. He was in great form—the very life of the party. His speech was in the form of a bitter attack. (Cf. His attack was in the form a bitter speech: with *form*–4.)

The movements from the third sense to the fourth and from the fourth to the fifth can be set out as follows :

more concrete less Abstrabt	effect, manifestation		4	5′
⋮	material cause	3′	⋮	⋮
⋮	formal cause	3	⋮	⋮
less concrete more abstract	efficient and/or final cause		⋮ 4′	⋮ 5

Note : 3, 4, 5 stand for senses 3, 4, 5 and 3′ 4′ 5′ for the respective opposite terms—material, function/spitit, and matter.

This is a typical example of polysemy of the kind that does *not* involve openness of concept or essential contestation. While particular pairs, say, sense 1 and sense 2, are likely to turn up in the same word or phrase in other languages, there is something parochial about the whole set of five senses. What about each of the opposed pairs of senses, say, 1 and 1′, 3 and 3′ ? They are less parochial and so likely to found in a large variety of languages. Note that the English noun *shape* has senses similar to 2 (dim shapes in the mist), 3 (the shape of things to come), and 4 (bribery in any form or shape).

One additional observation needs to be made at this point about the third sense—formal cause underlying a concrete object or piece of activity as opposed to its material cause. In this formulation of sense 3 we have emphasised how form is opposed to substance or material. In sense 3 *form* acts, at the same time, as a cover term for two abstractions—structure and system. Let us say that form appears in two modes—the conjunctive mode in which form consists in the structural or constitutive relations between part and part and between part and whole; and the disjunctive mode in which form consists in the systematic or substitutive relations between instance and instance and between instance and norm. Form in the conjunctive mode or structural form is based on and-relationships—part and part within a whole. Form in the disjunctive mode or systematic form is based on or-relationships—norm underlying this instance or that, position occupied by this element or that. In justification of this apparent digression I have to point out that some of the disputes at least about form stem from its hasty identification with just one or the other of these two modes. For example, those who emphasize the uniqueness of a work of art speak of form in art exclusively in the conjunctive mode, others would be willing to grant the possibility of speaking of form in art also in the disjunctive mode. They will tolerate, even welcome, questions such as ' But couldn't the poet have used this other word *in place of* the one he has actually used ? And if he hasn't, why hasn't he ? " Again, when we speak of the form of any language, we may mean form in the disjunctive mode or form in the conjunctive mode depending on whether we look upon language as activity (energeia) or as artifact (ergon). The form of language as an activity will be

disjunctive, the form of language as an artifact will be conjunctive. Similar observations could be made in respect of the form of other social institutions.

Let us now turn to the senses of the noun *form* as a philosophical term and relate them to the ordinary usage senses presented so far. (Ordinary usage sense 5 probably originated form use (iii) out of the philosophical uses set out below.)

(i) Plato (in this sense the term *idea* is more common; this use of the term *form* in presenting Plato's ideas is Medieval) : universal essence, pattern regarded as a real transcendent entity of which existing things are imperfect representations. (Compare *form*–5.)

(ii) Aristotle : formal cause. (Compare *form*–3.)

(iii) Medieval Scholastics : that which makes anything a determinate kind of being, essence. (Compare *form*–5. This sense has roots in certain Aristotelian doctrines.)

(iv) Francis Bacon : conditions for the existence of any given nature or quality by knowing which the latter would be produced. (Compare *form*–3 and *form*–5.)

(v) Immanuel Kant : one of the two a-priori forms of intuition (i.e. subjective factors of knowledge) that constitute the conditions of the possibility of experience (i.e. that mould reality as given by the senses and makes it possible to perceive and know objects), namely, space and time. (Compare *form*–3 and *form*–4. Perhaps one can say that Kant's sense arises out of an attempt to see certain formal causes as efficient causes. *Form* in ' forms of intuition ' is probably *form*–4.)

When Ludwig Wittgenstein speaks of the forms of life he is probably using *form* in a sense intermediate between ordinary usages senses 3 (formal cause) and 4 (actual manifestation). Perhaps one can say that he sees the form–3 of the manifestation as a reflection of the form–3 of the intent or energy behind the manifestation.

Since persons discussing art and aesthetic qualities use the term *form* with particular fondness, it will be useful to find uses for the five senses of *form* in such contexts.

(1) In discussing sculpture, architecture, and their extra-artistic analogues, form–1 and its opposite could be distinguished. Thus, the beauty of sculpture is both beauty of form and beauty of body.

(2) In discussing painting and the graphic arts, dance, and their extra-artistic analogues, form–2 and its opposite could be distinguished. Thus, a painting may evince a sense of form but not a sense of colour or light-and-shade or surface-texture.

(3) In discussing any art, one can say that the material of art becomes its medium by being given a form–3 in the first instance. It is this form that we miss when speak of formlessness in relation to works of art or their extra-artistic analogues.

(4) This form–3 has an underlying function, content, or spirit. Here form–4 is being attended to.

(5) In the final analysis, the form of a work of art is the shaping of the material, the shaping of the content, and the essence (form–5) responsible for its existence. In other words, a work of art is a form of life.

Style could be understood as *form* (in senses 3, 4, 5) in relation to the material and the medium of a work of art. When we speak of forms of literature (or of poetry or of prose fiction or of music) we are using *form* in senses 4 and 5–thus tragedy is a form of fiction and a given piece of fiction may be the manifestation of the tragic form.

I trust that this linguistic analysis of the meaning of the English noun *form* is of more than parochial interest, i.e. it holds some interest for the philosophical analysis of the meaning of the term *form* in the Western philosophical tradition. (The current Indian use of nouns like *rūpa*, *ākṛti* as loan translations of the English noun *form* is of course more an offshoot of this tradition than any continuation of the classical Indian tradition. Specifically, I recommend *rūpa*, *ākṛti*, *ākāra rūpa*, and *sattva* respectively for ordinary usage senses 1–5.)

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NOTES

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1. A less jargonized but quite adequate reportive definition appears in *The Pocket Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (2nd edition 1925): " person related to another by descent from one person through two of his or her children ". In the usage of some persons the term *cousin* is further limited to persons of own or descending generation. The expression ' of higher-than-first degree of collaterality ' in the anthropological linguist's definition can also be paraphrased as ' a consanguineal whose parents are not one's collineal' this excludes brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, greatuncles, and so forth.