Language and Community[1]
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The intention of this paper is to test the hunch that there must be some correlation between theory of language and theory of community. Why this seems worth doing should come out in the course of the paper. It should be said that it was meant to fit between a paper by Raymond Williams and one by David Cooper, in a symposium on the theoretical basis of a 'common culture'.

§1—TWO VERSIONS OF SOCIETY

Raymond Williams writes: 'We live in almost overwhelming danger, at a peak of our apparent control. We react to the danger by attempting to take control, yet still we have to unlearn, as the price of survival, the inherent dominative mode' (*Culture and Society* 1780-1950, Penguin edition, p. 322).

We have to unlearn the dominative mode in social relationship. That programme is part of a complex argument, the whole of which I have no intention of spelling out here, in my crude orthography. But the point of the case is that the line of writers and thinkers studied in Williams' book, the tradition he presents there, from Burke and Cobbett down to George Orwell, is a tradition of criticism of, and protest against, the official ideology and the prevalent consciousness of our society: 'The development of the idea of culture has, throughout, been a criticism of what has been called the bourgeois idea of society. The contributors to its meaning have started from widely different positions, and have reached widely various attachments and loyalties. But they have been alike in this, that they have been unable to think of society as a merely neutral area, or as an abstract regulating mechanism. The stress has fallen on the positive function of society, on the fact that the values of individual men are rooted in society, and on the need to think and feel in these common terms' (pp. 314-5).

The stress falls, that is to say, on the relevance and urgency of reforming our structures of understanding and response, our modes of interpretation and sensibility, in the sense of the 'collective idea'. We have one way of doing things and treating people which is the life-style of bourgeois culture, what Williams calls the basic individualist idea, and the institutions, manners, habits of thought and intentions which proceed from it; and we have an alternative style

of life which is what is properly meant by working-class culture: the basic collective idea, and the institutions, manners, habits of thought and intentions which proceed from that.

The individualist idea and the collective idea: we may say, the mystique of the individual and the principle of community. But nobody would deny that our experience, at the micro-social level and on the larger scale, is deeply confused and contradictory. There are limit cases in which it is plain that the mystique of the individual operates and there are cases in which it is obvious that the principle of community is at work; but for the most part, in this society, we live under the confused pressure of both. This is either because we have been shaped by the individualist mystique and have come to see that it must be revised by the principle of community; or because we have been formed by the principle of community and, in reaching for consciousness in this society, have been exposed to the mystique of the individual. That is just another way of describing what happens in a class-divided society such as ours. It is not an exhaustive or even decisive analysis.

What matters, in this context, is the fact that the mystique of the individual and the principle of community have to do, in the end, with alternative ideas of the nature of social relationship, with opposed and conflicting conceptions of the nature of how people may and do behave towards one another: 'The basis of a distinction between bourgeois and working-class culture is only secondarily in the field of intellectual and imaginative work. . . . The primary distinction is to be sought in the whole way of life, and . . . we must not confine ourselves to such evidence as housing, dress and modes of leisure. Industrial production tends to produce uniformity in such matters, but the vital distinction lies at a different level. The crucial distinguishing element in English life since the Industrial Revolution is not language, not dress, not leisure —for these indeed will tend to uniformity. The crucial distinction is between alternative ideas of the nature of social relationship' (p. 312).

There is no need to labour this here. On the one hand there is the version of social relationship which we identify as the mystique of the individual. What is fundamental there, is that society is regarded as a neutral space within which each individual is free to pursue his own development and his own advantage and interest, as a supposed 'natural right'. Politics, the exercise of social power, is thought necessary only in so far as it will protect individuals in their basic right to set their own course within the social space. This is, of course, the philosophy of laissez-faire capitalism, the ethos of the acquisitive society, the possessive individualism which C. B. Macpherson has documented in his book, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (1962). It is the set of structures of understanding and sensibility, the network of responses to things and people, which the experience of being brought up in this society offers. This is how the pressure is,

overwhelmingly, in our education system, in the communications media, in urban architecture, in the structures of industry. It is, in that sense, the prevalent consciousness in our society, the character-istic way of doing things and treating people; and if you do things differently, and treat people in a different kind of way, then it is because you belong also (as perhaps most of us now do, more or less) to the alternative: the dissident, unofficial, largely subterranean, certainly subversive, version of how to do things and treat people: the idea which regards society neither as neutral nor as merely protective, but as the positive means for all kinds of growth and development, including the growth and development of the in-dividual: 'Development and advantage are not individually but commonly interpreted. The provision of the means of life will, alike in production and distribution, be collective and mutual. Improve-ment is sought, not in the opportunity to escape from one's class, or to make a career, but in the general and controlled advance of all. The human fund is regarded as in all respects common, and freedom of access to it as a right constituted by one's humanity; yet such access, in whatever kind, is common or it is nothing. Not the in-dividual, but the whole society, will move' (p. 313).

Access to being human is common or it is nothing. Access to being human is so far from being common, in our society at least, that it is systematically a matter of privilege: elitist and exclusive, restrictive and destructive. We do in fact think and feel in terms of the in-dividualist idea. We are in fact brought up and educated and con-stantly pressured into interpreting and responding to every situation in terms of the mystique of the individual. We have to work, to live and love and think and feel, in a society in which possessive in-dividualism is the characteristic ethos, present in most of what we hear and read, present in the structures of our experience, present in our jobs.

But for one reason or another, since the beginning of the long revolution, we have become gradually and fragmentarily conscious of the alternative. We are beginning to see that every situation can also be interpreted and responded to *commonly*: not competitively but collectively: not in terms of the prevalent mystique of the in-dividual but rather according to the principle of community.

This is not at all so easy to practise as it is to formulate, and it is difficult enough even to formulate. 'It is very difficult', Raymond Williams says (p. 301), 'to think clearly about communication, because the pattern of our thinking about community is, normally, dominative.' We operate normally, in this society, with an under-standing of society which is dominative: it is a theory and an experience according to which the majority are ruled, led, guided, organized, manipulated, exploited, or whatever, by a minority: some élite, however elected. That is what matters: the pattern of our thinking and feeling about community is dominative. We think and feel

excludingly and dividingly. It is not easy to do otherwise; the whole pressure of our society is in this sense, and it is perfectly possible to be a socialist or a communist and yet think and feel according to the dominative mode. To be clearer, it is better to extend Raymond Williams' phrase and speak of the dominative-servile mode of social relationship (he brings out in what he says about deferentiality that this is what he means). Hegel is never mentioned in *Culture and Society*, but this idea plainly goes back to the discussion in the *Phenomenology* (1807) of *Herrschaft* and *Knechtschaft* (which fascinated Marx so much). In the relationship between master and servant, so Hegel argues here, the master envisages himself alone as a fully conscious person, as a person in the strong sense, independent and autonomous, while his servant is merely his tool; but as the relationship develops, so Hegel says, the master too is degraded, deformed, reduced, even more damagingly so than the servant. The servant is, of course, limited and deformed —his aims and purposes are so defined by the commands of the master that he can do little more than assert himself in the barest possible way. But the master, in so far as he sees himself as the master, cannot find in the servant any response through which, in turn, he could find himself as a fully developed person. The master has cut himself off from the kind of relationship in which self-consciousness grows through one's being an object of another's regard and concern; whereas the servant can at least see in the master something he wants to become . . . but for both, in the end, personal growth is fatally limited by the master-servant relationship. The dominative-servile structure of our society is not just divisive: precisely as divisive, it limits and restricts possibilities of human growth on all sides.

'Any real theory of communication', Williams says (p. 301), 'is a theory of community.' Our version of what communication is, of how it happens, is part of our version of what community is, of how it happens. There is some connection, obscure and elusive as it may be, between our understanding of the place of language in human life and our understanding of the place of society in human life.

Is there any equivalent, in our thinking about language, to the alternative versions that occur in our thinking about community? Is there one conception of language which might be connected with the mystique of the individual, is there a second conception of language which would seem to be aligned with the principle of community; and is it true that the individualist conception has long predominated, and that it is now slowly yielding to the collective idea?

§2– TWO THEORIES OF LANGUAGE

Well, of course, there *are* alternative theories of the nature of language. The place where this emerges most clearly, for us, is in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein; and the significance of what happens there is well brought out by J. N. Findlay in a two-part

paper he wrote back home to share his experience of the course Wittgenstein gave in 1939, and which has been republished as the first chapter of his book, *Language, Mind and Value* (1963).

The whole story is complicated, but it is generally accepted now that there has been a kind of dualism in our thinking about the relationship between thinking and speaking on the one hand, and between words and things on the other. None of this is absurd. Language is the utterance, the visible expression, of thought and feeling, and words do name things. It is plain enough, for instance, that the words we utter do often fall short of what we feel; our language seems often to be inadequate to render the intensity of our emotion or the depth of our insight. There is some gap, some *décalage*, between our meanings and the utterance of them, sometimes at least. The question is whether such experiences are to be counted as basic, or not rather seen within the more fundamental experience, which is that thinking and speaking coincide. We do use words to name things: I point to an object and I utter a particular sound; but the trouble starts when we begin to assume that some of the sounds which we utter must stand for objects even if these objects are not at all visible or ordinary. In either case, then, this understanding of the nature of language seems to postulate the existence of entities which are mere projections, in another medium, of linguistic symbols. Such examples bolster the idea that language is a system of signs introduced merely to communicate ideas or feelings already conceived, and to denominate things already familiar, prior to and independently of any language as such.

One may distinguish, very summarily, two basic attitudes to language in the course of western thinking. In the first, language is regarded as merely a system of signs, an instrument which serves to point to things known independently of it and to utter thoughts formulated prelinguistically. In the other attitude, on the contrary, language is regarded not so much as the instrument but more as the matrix of understanding, not so much the means of expression as the source of meaning at all. Language is the occurrence of meaning in the first place; it is language which makes things intelligible, it is in language that our world emerges, it is in language that our world is given to us and discovered by us in the first place. We are born and brought up in language.

We have to acknowledge, of course, the point which Wittgenstein makes in *Philosophical Investigations*: what we speak of as language is a family of more or less interrelated structures. A lot of very different, though related, activities count as language (1, 108). Language, as we are familiar with it, the ordinary language in which our life takes place, is all our meaning and deciding, our persuading and mourning, our loving and hating, and so on.

Now, it is clear that Wittgenstein spent a good deal of his energy in counteracting a particular notion of language. Perhaps the best

statement of this is to be found in the Blue Book (p. 3): 'It seems that there are *certain definite* mental processes bound up with the working of language, processes through which alone language can function. I mean the processes of understanding and meaning. The signs of our language seem dead without these mental processes; and it might seem that the only function of the signs is to induce such processes, and that these are the things we ought really to be interested in. . . . We are tempted to think that the action of language consists of two parts; an inorganic part, the handling of signs, and an organic part, which we may call understanding these signs, meaning them, interpreting them, thinking.'

Wittgenstein's programme, in *Investigations*, was to surmount this dichotomy between handling signs and meaning them; but it is one thing to assert this, it is another matter altogether to do it for oneself and for one's own society, and to work out what implications, for personal and social relationships, the surmounting of this dichotomy might have.

The starting-point of *Investigations*[2] is a quotation from Augustine's *Confessions* which sets out his conception of language: his conception, so we are told by Norman Malcolm, not because Wittgenstein could not find the conception expressed there stated just as well by other philosophers, but 'because the conception *must* be important if so great a mind held it'. Wittgenstein seldom speaks of the significance his work might have, of the impact the liberation from an inadequate and one-sided conception of language might have on the whole range of ways in which we try to understand ourselves; but a remark like that surely indicates how far-reaching he knew his programme to be, how radical and serious, because to correct our understanding of language is to correct our understanding of community.

The conception of language presupposed by Augustine is entirely in terms of pointing and signs. Words name things, a child is taught to speak merely by being taught to recite the names of certain things when somebody points to them, and so on. But the first objection Wittgenstein makes to this is that it ignores the difference between various kinds of words. You may well teach a child what the word 'sugar' means by pointing to lumps of sugar, but this cannot be how you teach him to use words like 'perhaps' and 'today'—words which involve time and possibility and the future, words which are therefore central in learning what it is to be a human being. But it is plain that there must be some context of meaning already in existence before the child can be brought to appreciate that the word 'sugar' is actually the name of these particular objects, and not (say) the word for their shape or colour. This leads to Wittgenstein's brilliant refutation of the idea that language is taught primarily by pointing, by ostensive explanation. He shows that all explanation depends on

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[2] I have made these points before, in an entirely different context; cf. *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, September, 1965.

some previous context; you cannot point meaningfully to anything unless some context of intelligibility already exists. Pointing does indeed bring about understanding of the meaning of certain words, but only together with and on the basis of some preliminary *training*. It is because we have been brought up in a certain way that we are able to ask 'What is that called?', and to receive the name in reply (1, 27). Pointing can always be interpreted (1, 28); you have to be familiar already with what meaning is before you can understand an ostensive definition (1, 33). Augustine's description may well fit a certain system of communication, but it is something a good deal less complicated than what we are familiar with as language (1, 3).

In a similar sort of reversal of accepted perspectives, Wittgenstein shows that private thoughts presuppose conversation and a public universe of discourse. We are strongly tempted, he says, by the idea that what we mean is already present in the mind before we give it expression (1, 334). A French politician once wrote, so Wittgenstein claims (1, 336), that it is characteristic of the French language that words occur in it in the order in which one thinks them — as if nobody could think a sentence with the word-order of German or Latin just as it stands! But (1, 344) can we imagine a tribe of human beings in which nobody ever spoke out loud but everybody could nevertheless practise interior monologue? What would this be like? Could speaking to oneself, interior monologue, be logically independent of *all* participation in conversation? On the contrary, Wittgenstein shows here that private thoughts depend on spoken, and thus on shared and public, language—on one's being related to other people. Monologue is a sophisticated activity, dependent on dialogue. You only learn how to talk to yourself if you know how to talk to other people (which may not be saying anything very straightforward, because how you talk to other people can be a very devious activity).

Pointing works, then, only in an already meaningful context; private thoughts derive from and depend on public conversation. Each of these proposals, so characteristic of Wittgenstein, has its equivalent in the work of Martin Heidegger: the dominant philosopher in the non-English philosophical tradition, and so different in method and approach that the convergence is remarkable. What is interesting, beyond this, is that neither of them was distinguished as a great democrat, though Wittgeinstein took what most of us would regard as the more honourable course of action in the 1930s. In *Sein und Zeit*, you find Heidegger saying that you cannot listen unless you already understand (p. 164), and that being alone is a deficient mode of being with others (p. 120). His project, in effect, is exactly the same as Wittgenstein's: to surmount the post-Cartesian philosophy of the isolated subject by means of a thoroughgoing elaboration of a philosophy in which the human subject is always the participant in a community prior to becoming a subject at all

or to seeing things as objects. In fact, with Heidegger's growing concern with the nature of language, the parallel between the two programmes has become even more striking. For Heidegger too is particularly concerned to expose the onesidedness of the prevalent conception of language. He writes as follows, in *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (p. 35): 'The nature of language is not exhausted by its being a means of communication. That account does not even touch its real nature but refers to what is merely a consequence of its nature. Language is not just a tool which man possesses along with a lot of others. On the contrary, prior to that, language is what secures the possibility of a stance in the middle of the intelligibility of things at all. Only where there is language is there world: that is, the constantly changing round of decision and performance, of deed and responsibility, but also of caprice and noise, decline and confusion. Only where world prevails is there history.' Language is not some apparatus introduced afterwards to name things with which we are already familiar. On the contrary, language is what opens the world to us in the first place, language is the original eloquence of things. Man is the being who speaks; but this does not mean that he simply has this capacity to utter intelligible noises, it means that he discovers the world and himself in it. In *Holzwege* (p. 60) Heidegger says: 'In the prevailing conception language is taken for a kind of communication. It serves communication and agreement. But language is not merely and not even primarily a vocal and written expression of what is to be communicated. It does not merely present in words and sentences things plain and things obscure as meant in some particular way; on the contrary, it is language which brings things as such into the open in the first place. Where no language prevails, as in the being of stones, plants and animals, then there is no access to things either. . . . Any given language is the occurrence of the word in which its own world dawns historically on a community . . . the event in which things as such become intelligible for man in the first place.'

What matters more, however, for our present purpose, is Heidegger's idea that language occurs first as conversation. In a well-known passage in *Erläuterungen* (p. 36) he writes: 'We—human beings—are a conversation. The being of man is rooted in language; but language occurs really only in conversation.' This surely corresponds with what Wittgenstein is saying. The two points we have mentioned go to bear this out. Ostensive explanation requires some previous training, some community, some tradition, some *home*. We have to be 'broken in' or 'domesticated' before anything can be explained to us: in Wittgenstein, *erklären* presupposes *abrichten* (1, 5). To elucidate and clarify, to point and name, are activities which are possible only within an already existing shared world of meaning, only within an already shared form of life. The pointing and naming game (1, 27) is always preceded by a context, a situation, which

originates and sustains the meaningfulness of such a game at all. Then, secondly, our capacity to keep thoughts private, our capacity to think without always speaking aloud, our capacity to read and to calculate without doing so aloud, and so on, depend on our participation in conversation, on our sharing a form of life in which people are always together before they can retreat into privacy and isolation.

Intention, for instance, is embedded in a situation, in customs and institutions (1, 337). What people count as justification for saying or doing something is shown by how they think and live (1, 325). The shared way of doing things is the reference-system by means of which we explain a foreign language to ourselves (1, 206). We eventually reach the bedrock of what we actually *do*: behaviour (1, 217). We have rules and conventions: Wittgenstein has a great deal to say about this. When we obey a rule, for instance, we don't so much *choose* as simply *follow*: the rule is already there, the convention exists, there is a custom (1, 219). The word 'rule' is related to the word 'agreement': if you have taught somebody to use the one, then he knows how to use the other too (1, 224).

This agreement has its locus primarily in ordinary language. How do you know that some colour is red? It would be an answer to say that you have learnt English (1, 381). The concept 'pain' is learnt with one's learning language (1, 384). 'Sensation' is a word of our common language, not of a language intelligible to me alone: so the use of this word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands (1, 261). And this agreement, this shared understanding, is not merely an agreement in definitions: if language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also in judgments (1, 242). The example Wittgenstein offers to illustrate this is that it is one thing to provide a description of methods of measuring and quite another to obtain and express results of measurement—but what we understand by measurement is not determined solely by the description, by the a priori definition of rules for measuring, but also by a certain constancy in the results.

Wittgenstein asks himself (1, 241) whether he is saying that it is human agreement, convention, that decides what is true and false—and to this he replies that it is, after all, in *language* that human beings agree, and that this is not simply agreement in opinions but primarily agreement in form of life. Something is true and something is false if it is something people *say*, in the first place. The question whether something is true or false does not arise at all unless something has been *said*. It is in language, in the complex of activities which is speaking, that human beings agree, that human beings have some consensus, and it is a consensus about the nature of the human form of life at all—I take it that this is what Wittgenstein means. The way he uses the idea of form of life can be regarded, I think, as an

attempt to remind us about the personal, rather interpersonal, fiduciary conditions of language. Language has no higher, or lower, status than the status of persons. Agreements among persons are the bedrock of language and linguistic situations. What Wittgenstein is pointing too, then, is the grounding or backing of language in interpersonal situations. Words mean nothing except when users stand behind them in company with listeners who understand what the user is doing with the words.[3] This is making the same point as Heidegger makes in speaking of language as conversation.

§3—LANGUAGE AND COMMUNITY

It is probable that, in a longer historical perspective, Wittgenstein and Heidegger would reveal their common intellectual background. Herbert Marcuse, in *One-Dimensional Man*, plays Wittgenstein's theory of philosophical analysis of language off against the work of Karl Kraus. Erich Heller tells us that Wittgenstein admired Karl Kraus as he admired no other writer of his own time: 'It was a case of elective affinities. Like Karl Kraus, he was seldom pleased by what he saw of the institutions of men, and the idiom of the passers-by mostly offended his ear – particularly when they happened to speak philosophically; and like Karl Kraus he suspected that the institutions could not be but corrupt if the idiom of the race was confused, presumptuous and vacuous, a fabric of nonsense, untruth, deception, and self-deception.'[4] What matters about Kraus, I think, is that he was concerned with how uses of language register systems of moral and political meanings, so that for him, far more explicitly than for either Wittgenstein or Heidegger, if you decide that there is a distinction between authentic and illusory meanings, between sense and non-sense, then you are making a political judgment. You are defining the nature of man, ultimately, because you are laying down the limits of possible human experience. Marcuse mistakes Wittgenstein for a positivist, but his general case against positivism —that it precludes whole areas of possible experience and thus forecloses the future of human nature—is very serious, in our present situation.

The satire of Karl Kraus (1874-1936) exposed, by detailed analysis of public speech, the political falsity of a whole society —and it is clear that in the political Kraus included the moral and the personal as well. The closest parallel to what he was doing would be some of George Orwell's work, though Kraus was far more devastating, far more total and radical, in his critique. But the point here is just that his credo was that exposure of language is exposure of society. Perhaps it required a satirist and a society as corrupt as the Austrian monarchy, where the public language had become so

[3] Cf. unpublished thesis by Dallas Milton High, Duke University, 1965.

[4] *The Listener*, 28th January, 1960.

blatantly delusive, for us to realize how language and community interlock.

Karl Kraus knew that in his analysis of the speech of his society he was performing a political analysis. But it was in the following generation, in philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Heidegger, that it became possible to formulate the presuppositions about language which the kind of work Kraus did seems to involve. This is not to say that either Wittgenstein or Heidegger set about doing any such thing explicitly and formally: that is not how things happen in the history of ideas (though they were both familiar with the work of Kraus, and the disintegration of the Austrian monarchy is as significant for understanding Wittgenstein as the *Kulturkampf* is for understanding Heidegger). The discovery that matters is that language does not simply provide us with the means more or less adequately to make visible our ideas and feelings, more or less conceivable and formulable non-linguistically; language provides us with the ideas and feelings themselves. To learn a language, to learn to speak, is to learn what people think and feel; it is to make one's own what is the common experience. The paradigm is the baby and the crux is that language is something you have to learn. You have to learn to speak, but this is to say that you have to be taught to be human. The possibility of being human is something which is learnt: you would never find out about it on your own. In the circle of faces round the cradle there has to be someone who will talk to the baby or he will never find out how to talk at all, he will never find out how to be human.

Raymond Williams says of George Orwell that he is a man who, while rejecting the consequences of an atomistic society, yet retains deeply, in himself, its characteristic mode of consciousness, and that this explains the desperate strain in so much of his writing. There is a comparable frenzy in Karl Kraus, and it would be instructive to contrast Wittgenstein's profound gloom about the future of civilization with Heidegger's ugly fascination with anti-industrial mysticism. There is a sense, however complex and polyvalent, in which they all take their stand with Raymond Williams: 'We live in almost overwhelming danger, at a peak of our apparent control.' What is not so clear, however, is whether Wittgenstein or Heidegger could see that it lies in the logic of their conception of the relationship between language and community that we have to unlearn the dominative-servile mode.

We live in a society in which we are more in control than human beings have ever been: there is no need to show that. But if we are in control, so secure, so sure, in so much of our activity, we are also very insecure. We live under the threat of the bomb, we live at the mercy of our own technology; but the real insecurity isn't there: surely it is in our social and personal relationships that we are so insecure, unprecedentedly so, precisely because we know so much

more about the nature of them than any previous generation has done. It is only now that we are beginning to understand, for instance, how easily and deeply we can damage one another. It is only now that parents are beginning to fathom what psychological damage they can wreak, unwittingly, on their children. It is only now that we are beginning to understand how dependent we are on each other. Nobody can be human all on his own. Some human beings, never having been treated as persons, never having been respected and understood and valued and loved, never find out what it is to be persons. It is only today that we are beginning to comprehend how much we depend on each other for our being human at all.

The others, as Heidegger says (*Sein und Zeit*, p. 118), are not every-one else but me, the others over against whom one's identity is defined. On the contrary, the others, other people, are those from whom one is not any different at all, for the most part. The others are those among whom one is and among whom one finds one's identity. And this way of being together with other people is not at all like the mere juxtaposition of objects within a context: the being together, here, is personal, it is community. We are together, Heidegger says, because we are the same kind of beings: we are together in a context, but our being in that context is being engaged by it, being concerned with it. Our being in meaningful and self-creating context is caring and sharing: it is participatory, interpersonal, fraternal, a being with others like ourselves. We are not a collocation of autonomous colliding atoms, we are a community of persons. *Die Welt des Daseins ist Mitwelt*. That is what Heidegger means, and it means something totally different from the atomistic experience of society documented by C. B. Macpherson, rendered into literature by Samuel Beckett (*Molloy*), staged by Ionesco (*The Bald Prima Donna*).

What we suppose, often, to be 'the human condition', is just a particular historical form of society, with a particular kind of con-sciousness (language) to match it. The falsity of that society and its language to the nature of man is something that is becoming more evident all the time. The colonialized peoples are recognizing this, for one thing. It is, for example, the argument of Frantz Fanon: 'Yes, the European spirit has strange roots. All European thought has unfolded in places which were increasingly more deserted and more encircled by precipices; and thus it was that the custom grew up in those places of very seldom meeting man. A permanent dialogue with oneself and an increasingly obscene narcissism never ceased to prepare the way for a half-delirious state, where intellectual work became suffering and the reality was not at all that of a living man, working and creating himself, but rather words, different com-binations of words, and the tensions springing from the meanings contained in words' (*The Wretched of the Earth*, Penguin edition, p. 252). Nearer home, we are being invited to reflect on the schizo-genic structures of our experience, for instance by R. D. Laing:

'True sanity entails in one way or another the dissolution of the normal ego, that false self competently adjusted to our alienated social reality' (*The Politics of Experience*, p. 119).

Nothing said under the heading 'language and community' can make much difference, in practical terms, in Vietnam or in South Africa. But there is a certain revolution going on in our self-understanding, a variety of trends of thinking and experience which converge and go to make the case that there is a whole conception of society which will not do, and the conception of the nature of language associated with it will not do either. What is wrong with that society is, of course, that it kills people, that there is Vietnam, that there is South Africa. But the alternative kind of society involves an alternative understanding of language. It involves, specifically, the notion of interdependence, the notion that language is where we depend on one another most, it is where we make one another human, it is where we respect and value one another, it is where we understand and love one another, it is where we make community. Or it is where we do no such thing: it is where our society shows up more obviously than many other places just how divisive and isolating and atomistic and exclusive it is. The new understanding of language is one of the places where we can begin to understand how deeply we are involved with one another, how there is either a common world or there is nothing. Or, worse than nothing, a world in which a minority refuses to face its dependence on the majority: a world in which the dominative-servile structures of life, maintained by force of arms, are corroborated by the violence of mystificatory theories of language and community. To see this is a beginning; we still have to learn, as the price of survival, the collective idea and the fraternal mode.