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MARGARET GILBERT ON THE SOCIAL NATURE OF LANGUAGE

Margaret Gilbert¹ is not persuaded that language has an essentially social nature, not least because she is far from convinced that the idea of a language creating and using social isolate is incoherent. When 'thought experiments' featuring such isolates have been proposed in the past, protagonists of the social nature position such as Peter Winch, have simply dismissed them as begging the question and/or missing the point. In Gilbert's eyes this is not enough. The onus must fall on those who object to the idea of the isolate for

... if we start from the standpoint of what seems obvious intuitively, it must be shown that those who write of language-using isolates have no right to do so. In other words, this question may indeed be begged, until it is shown that it is incoherent or otherwise inadmissible. (Gilbert, p. 314)

She asks to have the idea of the isolate shown to be inadmissible. She cannot see the force of the arguments that have already been given. Perhaps going over one or two of them again in relation to her own paper may do the trick.

She asks us to consider a case which she says she has no difficulty in imagining, one in which she will

... like Ayer, Strawson, and others, develop a version of a standard type of thought experiment, a kind of 'Crusoe' case. It does not seem self-contradictory to suppose that someone, call her 'Maude', comes into being on a desert island and, ex-hypothesi, uses and 'goes on' using the word 'mountain' in the sense of mountain (perhaps as part of sentences using other words also in certain senses). But if this is so, it seems that ex-hypothesi, Maude grasps a concept or rule for the use of the term 'mountain'. (Ibid., p. 314)

In our view, any Wittgensteinian would feel justified in retorting that in *this* case, at least, the point has indeed been missed and the question begged.

Gilbert contrives this case in order to examine the question whether or not it is "self-contradictory to suppose that someone, uninstructed in the use of any existing language, makes up a language for himself" (Gilbert, p. 313-14). How can anyone deny that Maude is making up

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the word 'mountain'? Why can't we imagine that she could make up many more and so invent her own language? And, if she does so, isn't it in isolation from any social context?

Our first observation is about the 'thought experiment' itself. It isn't very well thought out. Doubting whether someone can invent a *language for themselves* involves raising rather more deep and complex questions than those which can be met by the response "Well, I can imagine someone doing it!" What would we have to imagine in order to be able to imagine that? Just how would the social isolate talk and behave? Just what would it do in inventing *the first* word in a language all by itself? Saying that Maude comes along and uses the word 'mountain' once, and subsequently in a way consistent with the first, does not tell us very much about what the achievement being imagined for her consists in.

Merely saying that we can suppose someone coming into being on a desert island and using a word as we do does not justify us taking this to be a serious supposition. We do not find it easy at all to imagine someone called 'Maude' coming into existence on a desert island. Humans don't "come into being", they are born of other humans, nurtured, raised and socialised by them and, as part of that, taught a language. One of the most important things that Wittgenstein wants to *insist* on is the relationship of the learning of language to the nature of human beings. *That* very important line of argument is certainly begged by an approach which sees humans as the kind of creature that can be summoned into and out of existence.

Exactly what is it about Maude that we are being asked to imagine? Are we being requested to imagine a Crusoe-like character? Is Maude a human who comes into being with a biography, with the knowledge skills, capacities, *and language* that someone like Crusoe would have had as a result of his life elsewhere? Or does Maude come into existence with the same kind of biography, knowledge, skills and capacities, but *without the language*? Without the language but equipped in every other way? We have trouble imagining someone like that. We have even more difficulty imagining someone with all of these attributes, without a language, *but with the capacity to acquire (no invent!) one*. We cannot carry out the thought experiment because we have no idea what we are being asked to imagine. The case has a superficial plausibility because it appeals to something familiar. It appeals to our idea that *someone like us* could make up a word and use

it, thereafter, in a consistent fashion without guidance. But under the specifications of Maude that we have outlined, she is not remotely like us. If we ask how she is like us, what can we say? She looks like us? So do the orang-utang and the chimpanzee. What resources does she have for inventing a language? She emits sounds? Well and good. So do the cockroach and the rabbit. Are they equally like us? And do they have languages too?

It is, then, thoroughly unclear in just what ways we are to imagine Maude's similarities to ourselves and to what extent they are taken to be significant. Second, we would like to point out that what Maude is being asked to do is not just to make up a word and add it to the stock of a pre-existing language, but to *invent a language from scratch*. The idea of introducing a word into a language is one thing – not at all as simple a matter as Margaret Gilbert seems to think – but the invention of a word like 'mountain' as the first step towards the aggregation of a whole language is something else entirely.

"What would it be like if human beings showed no outward signs of pain (did not groan, grimace etc.)? Then it would be impossible to teach the child the use of the word 'tooth-ache'." – Well, let's assume the child is a genius and itself invents a name for the sensation! – But then, of course, he couldn't make himself understood when he used the word. – So does he understand the name, without being able to explain its meaning to anyone? – What does it mean to say he has 'named his pain'? – How has he done this naming of pain?! And whatever he did, what was its purpose? – When one says "He gave a name to his sensation" *one forgets that a great deal of stage setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense*. And when we speak of someone's having given a name to pain, what is presupposed is the existence of the grammar of the word "pain"; it shows the post where the new word is stationed. (Wittgenstein, para. 257, emphasis added)²

What does this argument show? First and foremost, it shows that more is involved than the invention of the word 'mountain' or 'pain'. Gilbert presupposes that Maude possesses mastery of the *practice* of naming and can, therefore, introduce a novel name for a kind of thing, 'mountain', without difficulty. However, Wittgenstein tries to show that naming is an activity which takes place within a language, and is an activity which has a purpose. Naming things as 'such and such' has to be placed alongside other activities such as describing them, referring to them, counting them, distinguishing them, comparing them, and so on, all of which are engaged in for different purposes.

Gilbert speaks of Maude using and going on using the word 'mountain'. We understand the example because we share with Gilbert (and

it seems with Maude) a language in which mountains can be distinguished from clouds, contrasted with hills, described as blue and hazy, counted, measured, and much more. *We* can name a mountain K9 because we can identify the sort of thing that ought to be and is usually named. But we can also see and identify the erratic in the quadrangle of the Main Building at Manchester University yet we don't want to name that Percy, H10 or anything of the kind. There is, then, a lot more to the practice of using a word like 'mountain' in the way that we do than simply uttering the sound 'mountain' every so often, or even saying 'mountain' when confronted with the sorts of things it is used to refer to.

What Gilbert has overlooked is the vital point about language, namely that it has a 'holistic' nature and is not a mere accumulation of names found in tandem with the contingent capacity to use such names in sentences. Using a particular word 'in the way we do' means using that word and lots of other words *together*. So, if an integral part of the way that we use the word 'mountain' is in contrast with 'hill', Maude cannot invent the word 'mountain' without also inventing the word 'hill'. It is not just a matter of coming up with the *first word* but with a network of related terms, at the very least.

None of which, of course, is to say that someone like Lavoisier cannot invent a name such as 'oxygen' and apply it to newly discovered phenomena. That is beside the point. What Lavoisier cannot do is invent the practice of naming for the first time, and then go on to invent the rest of our language games on that basis, but that is precisely what Maude has been conjured up to do.

The third argument we wish to raise concerns the way Gilbert focusses on the question of whether Maude could and would behave in a way that was consistent and so could be said to follow a rule in isolation from social context. Her claim is

...it is a function of her grasping "in her head" as it were, a certain determinate concept or rule which provides the standard for rule-following behaviour. (Gilbert, p. 314)

Characteristically, what concerns Wittgenstein is the question *whether it makes sense* to talk of isolates being either consistent or inconsistent in their behaviour. He says

It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which

a report was made, an order given or understood and so on. To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess are *customs* (uses, institutions). (Wittgenstein, para. 199)

Clearly, Wittgenstein does make a connection between rules and communities in that he treats rules as, *by nature*, social, collective phenomena, as customs, uses, institutions. It follows that he can take the view that language, *since it is a rule governed phenomenon*, is, by its very nature, social. To attempt to show, as Gilbert does, that someone's behaviour could obey a rule in isolation from social context simply by showing that the person might behave in a consistent fashion is to misunderstand completely the idea of 'obeying a rule' that Wittgenstein, at least, is promoting.

And hence also, 'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it. (Wittgenstein, para. 202)

For Wittgenstein, what stands in the way of the notion of the social isolate obeying a rule is not the difficulty or impossibility of regularities in behaviour, but the pointlessness of talk about obedience to rules where there can be no difference between what is right and what *seems to be right*. For a language using social isolate like Maude, there could be no such distinction because we would have no reference point other than Maude's view of what was right. Would Maude's thinking that she was acting consistently or correctly mean that she was doing so? Because there is no socially institutionalised custom or practice to which reference can be made, for Wittgenstein there could, in this case, be no question either of *succeeding or failing to follow a rule*. Further, we cannot say that Maude's use of 'mountain' does or does not correspond with our use of 'mountain' for that would be to set it in a social context and to appraise it against a community's standards. Maude would no longer be a social isolate. Of course, were we to do that, then we could see if Maude's behaviour did depart from the standard used to assess it and there would be a distinction possible between being right or consistent and seeming so. Once again the example we are asked to envisage turns out to be utterly impoverished. It simply does not address the central and crucial issue that Wittgenstein raised, namely the impossibility of imagining a language using social isolate where there could be a difference to be

marked between being right and seeming to be right in the use of language.

We intend to keep this paper brief and so cannot expand upon the importance of the ideas of practise and training in the acquisition of rules. Nor can we do more than point to the way that these are obviated by the idea of social isolate. This has been only a most perfunctory account of Wittgenstein's thought on this matter and has made no attempt to draw out the subtlety and complexity of the arguments against the idea of a rule following social isolate contained in the many remarks which embed the ones we have cited. Our conclusions are, then, of a limited and negative kind. Margaret Gilbert has adopted a version of the standard argument used against Wittgenstein to show the possibility of a language using isolate. This may not be the strongest case to be made out but it is, it seems, the most popular. We have attempted to make it clear that this standard case, despite the protestations of its proponents, does indeed beg the central question that was at issue for Wittgenstein. If this is the way that we are to conceive of the language using social isolate, then as a response to Wittgenstein's arguments, it is wholly inadequate.

NOTES

¹ Margaret Gilbert: 1983, 'Has Language a Social Nature?', *Synthese* 56, 301–318.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein: 1958, *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell, Oxford.

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