The concept of a person and the ontology of common sense[1]

A short sketch to be elaborated

vivitur ingenio, cetera mortis erunt
motto of J.H. Merck (1741-1791)

I.

Even if Wittgenstein is right in holding that ordinary language is not correctly understood by thinking of it as a system of symbols which first is given a formal structure and only then is 'interpreted' by adapting it to the 'model' of reality and what is given with it[2], it cannot be held to be meaningless to speak of an 'ontology' coming with ordinary language as it comes with the ontological commitments of a theory. Let us call it the ontology of common sense and let us ask:

What is there really according to the ontology of common sense?

Quine has taught that to be is to be the value of a variable.[3] This teaching advises us to look for variables in ordinary language to determine what there is according to its ontology. Although this is a course that can be followed fruitfully, it is so only with a pinch of salt. For there are reasons
against taking Quine's teaching as the whole truth about existence along the following lines. Variables are a kind of general expressions. Even if one holds that the ideas of general and singular are strictly correlative and not possible without the structure of elementary propositions coupling a singular and a general term, variables are for this very reason not basic generalities. The basic generalities are predicates in singular propositions and even a language with only singular propositions should have an ontology containing what is talked about in these propositions.
The pinch of salt with which Quine's course can be followed is this. Even if being the value of

1 The concept of common sense I rely on is not the descriptive one of G.E. Moore, but the normative one of Kant 's *Critique of Judgement*, § 40.
2 *Philosophical Grammar* IV.46 c: „Language is not something which is given a structure and which is then adapted to reality.“ (own translation)
3 e.g. *From a Logical Point of View* [2]1961, 103. (Harper Torchbook Ed.)

a variable may not be the whole truth about existence, what we have variables for certainly presupposes that their values possibly exist. For we would not have invented expressions of higher generality like variables without their being possible and without a need for them. So looking for the basic variables in ordinary language is at least a good start for determining what there is according to its ontology.

But are there really any variables in ordinary language? Quine again taught us that the everyday model of variables in a formal language are indefinite pronouns in ordinary language. The most elementary indefinite pronoun in ordinary language is 'something'. Everything that can be the topic of speech is something. That's why Quine's most inclusive answer to the question of what there is could be and has been: everything. But it is of outmost importance to realize and to acknowledge – as at least the latter Quine did not – that ordinary language contains another indefinite pronoun of equal foundational status as 'something', namely 'somebody'. This is a fundamental difference of ordinary language compared to formal languages with only one type of individual variable ('x, y, z …'). 'Somebody' implies another type of individuals besides the 'objects' over which 'something' ranges. As 'object' is the nominalization of 'something', 'person' is the nominalization of 'somebody'. According to its basic indefinite pronouns the basic entities of the ontology of common sense divide into two classes: objects and persons.

II.

Before continuing and asking what else there is according to the ontology of common sense, it is useful to introduce some technical terminology coming from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. There a difference is explained between material concepts and formal concepts. (4.122 sqq.) Material concepts in a formal notation are represented by functional expressions; formal concepts are represented there by variables. Wittgensteins wrote that he introduced this distinction (and several related to it) in order to explain confusions about internal and external relations. In his early theory this distiction is bound up with his teaching about what can be said in language and what can only be shown (or shows itself); but as I believe – with the later Wittgenstein – that everything that can be expressed at all, can be expressed in language, I believe that it can be seperated from it.

A second mark of a formal concept according to Wittgenstein is that they are already given

with any of their instances. His example was the (pseudo-)concept of an object ('Gegenstand'). His argument for taking it as a pseudo-concept was that the question 'How many objects are there?' is meaningless ('sinnlos'), even if restricted to a demarcated area like a specific room. (4.1272).

Two points about formal concepts which are only implied by Wittgenstein should be made explicit. First, if formal concepts are already given with any of their instances, they must be understood to collect items which themselves are conceptually articulated already. Let us say for short that formal concepts classify other concepts, whereas material concepts classify what is given in perception and action. Second, if formal concepts are given with any of their instances, they may remain implicit, need not be articulated explicitly. Let us say: the formation of formal concepts is optional.

Can it then be said that the expressions 'object' and 'person' as elucidated so far are formal or express formal concepts in the Tractatus-sense? Concerning the expression 'object' the answer is: „yes!“ For Wittgenstein's test applies also to colloquial uses of 'object' – the question 'how many are there?' is meaningless as long as it is not determined what to count as an object, even if asked in relation to a specified area, e.g. a room. But the test does not apply to the expression 'person' as well. For the question 'how many persons are present in this room?' always has a definite answer.

Must one therefore infer that 'person' is not or does not express a formal concept? Not necessarily. One could as well conclude that contrasted with 'object' it does express a formal concept, but that it is, in contra-distinction to 'object', used in other contexts as a material concept as well – thereby taking to heart the teaching of Aristotle's πολλαχώς λέγεσθαι and Wittgenstein's use-conception of meaning as well.

Material concepts group entities together by common marks and thereby distinguish them indeterminately from other entities without these characteristics. That 'person' needs a distinguishing mark already in its use as a formal concept follows from its distinction from 'object' in this use . What else but a mark could distinguish the higher-level-concepts both variables express?

The mark in use for 'person' is being in command of speech. A person is a 'language using animal' (ζώον λόγον έχον[4]) as Aristotle long ago already saw. For a person essentially is the bearer of a personal name by which it can be addressed and referred to. 'Address someone' and

4 *Politics* 1253 a 10.

'refer to someone' are linguistic acts. Although it is disputed whether (personal) names belong to language, it cannot be denied that they are also spoken or written items and insofar (also) linguistic items. In distinguishing 'person' and 'object' as formal concepts we distinguish ourselves as language-users from everything else.

III.

Further clues to what there is according to the ontology of common sense can be gathered from elaborating on the concept of a person. I contend that the correct definition of a person (as the expression is used in ordinary language, used in the material sense) is: „A person is a language-using, acting and self-evaluating animal."

Landmarks in the analysis of the concept of a person have been texts by Strawson and Frankfurt. Both did not settle for the proposed definition and I don't want to discuss their proposals here.[5] Rather I shall elucidate the proposed definition directly.

The main noun in the definition is 'animal'. Here it does not mean 'brute', but 'living being (body)'. Animals are perceptible bodies capable of movement of their own accord. As perceptible they have an extended figure with a contour that can be followed with the eyes, measured in their dimensions or drawn. They are therefore spatial items which presuppose the formal concept of space. (Objects are spatial items too, but in contra-distinction to 'person' 'object' acquires the meaning 'not living being'.) Brutes as paradigmatic living beings further are born at some time and die at a later time. The birth and the death of an animal are *events*, datable items in time. They delimit the *process* of life, which is temporally extended and therefore measurable in its duration. 'Event' and 'process' are formal concepts for the two types of entities that are given to us under the temporal aspect. Their values designate what is elementary under the formal concept of time.

The duality of event and process has a spatial counterpart: *bodies* contrast with *masses* (e.g. sand, water etc.; Quine called the expressions for them 'continuative terms'). The difference between the concept-types is exactly the same: expressions for bodies and events are internally connected to criteria of identity, because they designate givens that are units of their own. Expressions for masses and processes need quantificational modifications to designate specific units (e.g. a heap of sand; a glass of water). The distinction first was explicitly formulated by

5 I did so in my paper (in German) 'Person-Sprache-Welt' on www.emilange.de.

Aristotle for a partition in the language of time: the expressions for activities and actions. I shall come to this shortly.

Following the implications of the use of expressions for animals, what there is in the universe of discourse in common sense has considerably extended already. There are animals, centrally among them persons. There is space and its constituent formal elements, bodies and masses. And there is time and its constituent formal elements, events and processes.

But concerning the 'existence' of space and time it is important to hedge against misleading imagery. We tend to imagine space as the ('infinite') room containing all finite rooms, the universal container of all bodies. But, of course, it is not. Although all finite rooms have a place in space, space is not the universal container. Rather it is the essence (German: 'Inbegriff') of all localizations for everything that can be located at all. [Not everything can: numbers, rules of any sort etc. cannot be but indirectly located. That does not mean that they were 'outside' of space – which would be a contradiction, because 'outside' is, literally, a spatial determination. It just means that spatial determinations are not applicable to them. 'Space' is the nominalization of the indefinite pronouns 'somewhere' or 'of some determinable size' as 'object' is the nominalization of 'something' and 'person' is the nominalization of 'somebody'.) Analogously time is not the endless chain of moments (the 'time-line' of 'nows') but the essence of all temporalization of everything that can be dated ('events') or clocked ('processes'). There are no pronouns 'somewhen' or 'of some determinable duration', but if there were, 'time' would be their nominalization.[6]

Finally, there are, to anticipate, actions and activities, which are the events and processes specifically related to persons as their causes or bearers.

IV.

The central activity of persons is the use of language, which is why 'language-using' is the central attributive modification of 'animal' in the definition for 'person'.

Humans are not born as persons. They become persons by learning their mother-tongue and

6 I may be handicapped here by not being a native speaker of English. There is, of course, 'sometimes', but to my understanding it implies possible recurrence. – German language contains the expression 'irgendwann' (at some indefinite time) and 'irgendwo' (at some indefinite place) in which the constituent 'irgend' has become an indefiniteness modifier. But in the historical past of German where we now use 'space' ('Raum') in categorical sense there was the indefinite pronoun 'irgend'; and where we now use 'time' ('Zeit') in the categorical sense there was the indefinite pronoun 'irgends' with a final 's', which is a mark of the grammatical genitive. The history of German language thus reflects the primateship of space over time in common sense. Expressed in a grammatical metaphor: time is the genitive of space.

growing into the culture that is structured by the language that is (becomes) their mother-tongue.

But what is the concept of a language?

Nobody in philosophy thought more elaborately and deeper about language than Wittgenstein. He denied that we have a material concept of language. His argument was: If we had a material concept of language, it should be possible concerning the period during which we could not yet speak for us to remember that we lacked our mother-tongue. But we simply cannot have this recollection.[7] Language therefore for Wittgenstein was a collective name ('Sammelname') designating the natural languages and several symbol-systems related to them in a family-resemblance way.[8] This conception construes 'language' as analogous to a formal concept.

A methodological consequence of this conception is that language has to be clarified from within and by using already all its ressources.[9] The foundational question becomes 'What is the meaning of a word?'[10] and the concepts with the help of which this question and related ones are clarified are 'use', 'explanation' and 'teaching/learning'.

Central is the insight that meaning can be explained in meaning-explanations and therefore the consequence: The meaning of a word is what is explained by its meaning-explanation[11] (which, of course, is analytically true). What is finally explained by a meaning-explanation is the *use* of an expression. The one who gets the explanation is thereby *taught* the meaning of an expression and, correlatively, *learns* it.

What Wittgenstein did not infer from his clarifications was that they permit the formation of a concept of language which compensates for the lack of a material concept. This concept explains language as 'a medium of representation and expression' with the unique status of being universal.[12]

For if we compare language with other media of representation and expression that humans use – painting, sculpture, architecture, dance, theatre, music etc. – the unique status of language becomes evident. When something in the other media is unclear and not understandable, one must speak, make use of language, to clarify it. But if something linguistic is unclear and not understood, one can make use of language itself to clarify and explain it. Although language

7 *Wiener Ausgabe* Vol. 3, 211 (MS 109 89).
8 *Philosophical Grammar* X.137 b.
9 *Philosophical Investigations* para.s 120-121.
10 The question opening *The Blue Book*.
11 *Philosophical Investigations* para. 560.
12 The expression „universal medium“ was coined by the Dutch-born, French-American Logician Jean van Heijenoort in his seminal paper >Logic as Calculus and Logic as Language< (*Synthese* XVII, 1967, 324 sqq.), but I use and explain it differently.

has to be learnt by mere training in the beginnings of becoming a person, it is the medium of representation and expression coming next to the ideal of being self-explanatory.[13] Therefore it is universal and as such unique.

That persons are language-using animals therefore means: they are the living bodies in command of an universal medium of representation and expression, which is a self-explaining medium as far as any existing medium could be. At the end of sect. II (in elucidating the concept of a person in a preliminatory way with respect to the contrast of 'somebody' with 'something') I wrote that we dinstinguish ourselves from everything else. The unique character of language as almost completely self-explaining is one well-founded reason for this anthropocentric self-distinction.

V.

What about the two other attributes in the definition of a person, 'acting' and 'self-evaluating'? The short answer to this question is: They are implied in 'language-using', but they have fields of application surpassing the linguistic in the narrow sense.

Making use of language is participation in a normative practice, our pervasive activity. Using propositions in speech acts (e.g. making an assertion; putting a question; giving a command etc.) are actions. Activities and actions contrast as processes and events. The paradigmatic case of linguistic activity and actions illustrates that actions happen against a background of related activities. The way to this insight was paved by Aristotle in formulating his distinction between πράξις and ποίεσις.[14]

That speaking a language is participation in a normative practice is evident from linguistic performances being accessible to evaluations as right or wrong (true or false in assertive speech-acts; satisfiable or not in the other pragmatic modes of language). And it is essential that they can be so evaluated not only by the addressees of speech-acts, but also by the speakers themselves. They are in command of their language not before they can correct themselves in case of slip or error.

Therefore language-users are essentially self-evaluators. That their self-evalutation is not

13 Meaning-explainations retrogradely are possible also for the beginnings of language resulting from mere training (Wittgenstein in German wrote 'Abrichtung' – which is mainly used for animals in the sense of brutes). But there the explanations peter our sooner and one has to end with statements like 'That's just what we do'.

14 *Metaphysics* 1048 b.

restricted to the linguistic, but in the end (in the embarrassing question for 'the meaning of life'[15]) relates to their entire life-performance, is what makes them persons.

VI.

The *totality of what is given* to language-users can be called *reality* (a nominalization of 'everything' as 'object' is the nominalization of 'something'). It is given to them in true propositions.

But propositional truth-claims can be false, propositions can be negated. In using negatable propositions to represent reality, we have surrounded the given with a space of possibilities the propositional expressions of which could be true but are not. The *totality of sense* (meaning) as different from the totality of truth should be called the *world* in contrast to reality.

According to the proposed distinctions the world is the general, the most encompassing totality, comprising what is true and what is false and furthermore everything that is at all meaningful ('sinnvoll'; that is, what can be understood at all). But the world is given to us singularly in the open totality of separate propositions. And propositions are used in speech-acts embodying claims to truth or satisfiability. Therefore reality or what there is cannot be separated from the claims embodied in speech-acts that are or can be endorsed or not.

Now, claims are made by persons and even if they are endorsed as widely as may be the conception proposed here seems to be caught in another kind of ontological relativity – not, as in Quine[16], to theories or conceptual schemes, but to the (a) community of persons sharing their ontological commitments. This would be a kind of subjectivism or idealism and would give belief instead of common knowledge or understanding a wide range.

At face value this could be taken to be descriptive of our cognitive situation. One person believes that there are gods or one god, the other does not; that there is a soul about which different things are believed, or that there isn't; Hegelians think that there are spirits of peoples being the subjects of history, liberals think there are not etc. etc. But these divisions in what is believed are not to be found with respect to everyday entities like
artefacts or human persons or even works of art. The examples mentioned for division of belief are not by coincidence high-levelled. They can be accounted for by a distinction developed in

15 Cp. My book *Das verstandene Leben*, Ch. I (on www.emilange.de; translation into English on academia.edu.)

16 Quine: *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, Columbia UP 1971. – Quine's (and Davidson's) conception is basically faulted by empiristically making no distinction between language and theory.

the inferentialism of Sellars and Brandom from the logical-empiristic distinction between observational and theoretical concepts. There are concepts that are used in observation reports the expressions for which can be explained ostensively and used in premisses of inferences. And there are other concepts to the use of which one is entitled only in conclusions, interpretation and theoretical explanation. In the latter field of concept-use there is much room for differences in belief, in the former the consensus has to be massive for understanding and communication to be possible.[17] With respect to observational terms, Brandom elaborates, language users tend to form reliable responsive dispositions to use, a fact that corresponds to their being learnt basically by being trained. This accounts for their stability and the massive consensus with respect to the observational.

That observational terms can be explained ostensively can also be seen to alleviate the problems concerning subjectivism and idealism some might have. Idealists maintain that the world is 'our representation', because we make the concepts by which it is articulated; realists maintain that the world is independent from us because whether our propositions are true or not depends on how things are, not on us. And they both believe that this is an exclusive alternative. But this is unfounded.

Ostensive explanations are normative as all meaning-explanations are. They use elements of reality as paradigms to which the terms are thereby calibrated. They so form internal relations between the terms and their paradigms, relations that cannot not exist. The relation of sense/meaning to the world is internal, as the idealist maintains; the relation of truth and satisfiability to reality is external as the realist maintains. In different respects both are right and the apparent exclusivity of the 'alternative' vanishes. Because reality has a say in the formation of concepts already (in the paradigms of ostensive explanations, in the dimension of sense), there is no room for the scepticism of idealism in the dimension of truth-or-falsity, for truth and falsity presuppose sense. So the apparent alternative between idealism and realism is blocked from the very beginnings of liguistically articulated understanding.

And there are other stabilizers for the commonality of understanding besides the difference between the observational and the theoretical. One follows from the anti-Cartesian principle that doubt with respect to cognitive claims is in need of good reasons. The acceptance of this principle in everyday understanding gives its discourse a default-and-challenge structure.19 As long as there are no good reasons for challenging a claim (and the ontological commitments

17 This is a tenet of so different hermeneutic conceptions as the ones of Gadamer and Davidson.

coming with it) the claim is good for endorsement. This accounts for much consensus in the theoretical also.

It also motivates a third stabilizer for cognitive consensus. Language-users making serious claims to truth and knowledge guide their practice of making judgements by the idea of judgement which is the impartial acceptability of the claim's content by everybody of good will, correct information and capable and willing to judge the state of affair concerning which the claim is made.[18]

VII.

These reminders of our practice of judgement from which our ontological commitments cannot be separated are a way to make the attempt dispensible further to specify in detail what there is according to the ontology of common sense. Of course, besides the items mentioned before, there are the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth; other living beings than persons and brutes, artefacts of many kinds; there are the orders of activity and actions, morality and the law; there are society and state as collective self-binding institutions to compensate for the limited (short-termed) rationality of individual activity and action etc. etc. But because all claims to these effects are bound to our practice of judgement, there is a rule of that practice that makes superfluous an enumeration of the items that are there. This is the rule: Any claim to existence made by a language user in uttering a claim seriously is prima facie a good one, contestable only with better reasons than the utterer is able to give. Because the utterer generically intends to say something true and '>p< is true' is equivalent to 'really p' or '>p< is real'. Whether what he intends is in fact satisfied, is up for the discussion in the community of language-users, in and for which the world and reality are given.

18 This is the gist of Kant's maxims of 'enlightened thinking' (especially of the second maxim),by which he explains his normative conception of common sense in § 40 of *Critique of Judgement*.