

ESSAY

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<„Although the logos is common, most people live as though they had their own thought“ (Heraclitus)>

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LOGOS, WORD, REASON

What is *logos*? Of course, the meaning of this word is manifold. In Greek, it could mean things as diverse as „reason“ or „word“. In many languages (such as English) there are, however, separate words that denote these two things. This itself suggests that the worldview of an ancient Greek and a contemporary Englishman may be different – for the former, the concepts of „word“ and „reason“ were intertwined so clearly that one word signified them, while for the latter it seems to be more separated. This may suggest either that the differences in our languages result from the differences in our thinking (as cognitive linguists would suggest) or that it is in fact our thinking which is determined by language (as the famous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis goes). This is, I reckon, a crucial problem which may help us understand the thought of Heraclitus better.

THE COMMON LOGOS

„Although the logos is common“, we read in one of the fragments of Heraclitus, „most people live as though they had their own thought“. There seem to be two main statements here. Firstly: there exists a „common logos“. At the same time – and this is something which seems unobvious, somewhat not in accordance with the first part, according to Heraclitus (hence the word „although“), most people seem to behave as if they were free to shape their own thoughts, as if their reasoning was independent. Independent from what? The *logos* – so the quote suggests, since Heraclitus seems to perceive the „common logos“ as something which makes the beliefs of most people, who believe in the independence of their thought, only false ideas (they live „as though“ they were indeed independent, which suggests that they are not). So what is this *logos*? We know that it is common and that it influences our thinking. Yet it is not clear whether it is language (*logos* as „word“) that does so or whether some non-linguistic factors, such as the common religious, philosophical or cultural attitudes of a given time (*logos* as „reason“). Furthermore, it is not clear to what extent are these general factors determining our thinking „common“. Are they the same for everyone everywhere or are they more dependent on cultural and historical factors, so, for instance,

they are common only for people of a given nationality or a given culture? Finally – this is the second main statement here - Heraclitus seems to believe that *most* people are not aware of the fact that their thinking is (at least to a considerable extent) determined by such factors, be they linguistic or non-linguistic. There is a hidden premise here – since Heraclitus didn't use the word „all“, but „most“, one may assume that he thought that certain people do not „live as though they had their own thought“. How should we interpret this? Do they not live „as though“ it was the case, because they do not have any illusions in this regard? Or is their thinking somehow not affected by the „common *logos*“? Since Heraclitus himself in this quote wanted to expose us to the fact that the *logos* is common, i. e. universal (at least in a given place at a given time, perhaps), then one may think that he meant the first case. Nevertheless, the second question also arises when discussing the quote. Let me list the topics which are relevant for the following discussion of Heraclitus' fragment, both questions concerning ideas and (sometimes implicit) premises expressed in the quote, as well as other important questions which Heraclitus might not have thought about. (1) Does there exist a factor influencing the thoughts of all people? For my purposes, I will divide this problema into two. (1.1.) Does there exist such a linguistic factor? (1.2.) Does there exist such a non-linguistic factor? (2) If so, for whom is it „common“ - for all human beings or only for certain groups, like national ones? (3) If so, do most people nevertheless believe in the Independence of their thinking from the factor? (4) If so, are some people devoid of this belief? (5) If (3) is true, are some people not affected by the common *logos*? Herein I shall examine these questions (with special attention paid to 1 and 2, since the validity of our answers to the next ones is entirely dependent on our conclusions regarding 1 and 2), taking into special consideration debates concerning cognitive linguistics and Noam Chomsky's generativism.

ON LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

Does our language form our thoughts? A radical version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which would constate that our thinking is entirely determined by our language, does not seem convincing. Why? Looking at it from a historical perspective, language is a relatively new phenomenon – at least when compared to thinking. Language, as historical findings show, developed among humans about 50,000 years ago. Furthermore, as Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner show in their book *The Way We Think*, the historical development of language was such that it was very complex from the very beginning! Historically – and this is one of the things on which cognitive linguists such as Fauconnier and Turner and generativists agree, since it is proven by numerous studies – there have been no traces of a language that would be considerably less complex than those that we know today; moreover, the differences among languages we know today are, of course, considerable, but their complexity is more or less similar. This is shown by the fact that even languages used by peoples considered to be primitive often demand considerable skills in order to use it. The language Dyirbal, used by a small group of indigenous people in Australia, certainly has its complexity – the word *bayi*, for instance, depending on the context can signify a bat, some birds, fire, certain phenomena concerning the weather, dangerous things in general... Obviously, this is only an example. To prove the equal complexity of all language definitely, one would need to conduct enormous comparative studies. Since this cannot be done herein, I will also present a more aprioric argument that it is not possible for a language considerably less complex than those we know to exist. Imagine that there existed a language with, for instance, a limited vocabulary which allows to express only some situations and doesn't allow for polysemic words (words which

have more than one meaning). However, the main goal of language is to provide an adequate description of reality to others (if that were not the case, there would be no need for language – we wouldn't need language if we had to „communicate“ only with ourselves, since we have a sufficient *prelinguistic* understanding of ourselves. This is proven by the fact that oftentimes, we want to communicate something about our internal state to others, and we feel that words cannot express our feelings, although we ourselves understand them very well). And such an adequate description is impossible with no polysemic words, since generally, we do not perceive things as objects detached from anything else (for example, as Dan Zahavi and Shaun Gallagher write in their *Phenomenological Mind*, I always see *my car* as *my car*, not as just another car separated from its context. It seems that this is indeed part of our everyday experience.), so words cannot have just one meaning for any person – they must make many people think of something special, i. e. they must be polysemic to some extent, so it is impossible for a simple monosemic language to exist. This, with the previous arguments, proves that a certain extent of complexity is required for a language to exist. This, on the other hand, suggests, that – let's add another factually justified premise: humans created language (since we are the only species to have language and we have not always had it) – humans must have had thinking complex enough to create language before knowing any language. Therefore, complex thinking is earlier than any language. Thus, our thinking cannot be entirely determined by language (there's no need to have a language in order to think). This, however, is not sufficient. It cannot be *entirely* determined, so it can either be determined by language to some extent, or not at all. I would like to prove that our thinking is determined by our language to a considerable extent. Why is it the case? Consider the earlier examples. The word *logos* in Greek or the word *bayi* in Dyrbal – both of these provide their users with certain categories and suggestions. When you are born Greek, you hear the word *logos* used to describe both „word“ and „reason“. A native Dyrbal user, on the other hand, may see their parents pointing to a bat, to an area in fire or to some other animal – or a dangerous thing in general – and hear the word *bayi*. It seems that it must lead such a user to think that there is some connection between these various things. If that were the case, it would follow that language influences, for instance, our thoughts regarding such connections. Is it the case? It seems to be true, since studies conducted by cognitive linguists have shown that how children use their vocabulary and perceive their world is highly dependent on the words that they hear. For instance, a study by Elena Lieven *et al.* showed that children who hear certain words preceded by the word „a“ do use such words mainly with that article, not with the definite article „the“. The inverse is also true: if a child hears „the chair“ very often, but almost never hears „a chair“, he or she will usually use the construction „the chair“. The aprioric constations concerning the use of polysemic words in various languages, combined with the empirical evidence that what a child *hears* when learning a language influences its language and thinking, seem to prove that language influences our thinking to a considerable extent. Just like a child who hears „the computer“ more often than „a computer“ will use the first one more often, a child who hears *logos*, *bayi* or any other word that is polysemic to a considerable extent (because, as shown above, all languages must be polysemic), will connect these words with the objects it signifies.

A NON-LINGUISTIC FACTOR?

Nevertheless, language doesn't have to be the only *common* (I will return to the topic of the factors being common or not later; I am aware that I may have seemed to avoid it for a

moment) factor influencing the thoughts of us. The proof here is very simple. Every individual is, to some extent, limited in what he can do or think in a given age and place. I mean *thinking* in a very literal sense; I do not mean, for instance, that our ability to „think freely“ may be limited by censorship. Of course, but censorship itself may make us unable only to *express* our thoughts, not to have the idea of something in general. What I mean is that a given worldview influences everybody's thinking to some extent. Let's consider the European Middle Ages (or just the Middle Ages, since Jacques Le Goff thought that the term „Middle Ages“ applies only to Europe). Of course, this was an era of a considerable domination of the Catholic Church over intellectual life. Does this mean that *everyone* agreed with the Catholic doctrine entirely? Surely, this cannot be the case. An example from the history of philosophy is the so-called Latin Averroism, a school of thought of, for example, Siger of Brabant. Siger tried to prove many things which would be unfathomable for a person believing entirely in that which the Church says –for example, that there exists only one soul (intellect) in the world. Boethius of Dacia, another Latin Averroist, attempted to show that the world is eternal and that there is an important separation between faith and reason – also barely imaginable in his times, the times when Thomism started to dominate European philosophy. So how may we say that their thinking was to any extent determined by external factors – cultural and historical? It is not the most important that they had to present their argument in a manner which would seem at least somewhat acceptable for the less „revolutionary“ philosophers and the Church. This is not the most important factor, because it is similar to the case of censorship. The fact of having their works in a certain way itself could not change their *thinking*, since publishing these works was only a way of expressing that which they already thought! The true influence of the *logos* in this case is more subtle: in fact, their thinking was determined by the times when they lived, because the time in which they were active made them have to respond – as philosophers – to certain specific problems. For example, the problems of whether there is only one soul in the world is not a very widely discussed one today; in that age, however, it was one of the most serious ones, since all of the philosophers then deemed most important (such as Aristotle and Averroes) thought about it. Thus, the historical context made people in a given time *respond* to certain questions; questions, which would not have otherwise been considered. This, on the other hand – I am basing this on another premise, i. e.: that the questions we answer lead to certain mental reactions and elicit different reactions (because different things would not be deemed different – and these questions we indeed do perceive as different - if they elicited the same reactions) – led to the fact that their thought was shaped in a certain way. This can be generalized for various times and cultures; today we have to answer questions concerning cognitive science or analytic philosophy, several hundred years ago it was necessary to prove the basic theorems of mathematics – and, because of the premise presented above, these various questions of a given age in a given culture elicit different mental reactions, so they lead to different thoughts. Therefore, our thoughts are influenced not only by linguistic factors, but also by cultural and historic ones, which I had to prove here.

HOW COMMON IS THE COMMON LOGOS?

Our thoughts are influenced by these factors. *Our*. What does it mean? After all, someone critical could say, what I presented so far have not been arguments for a *common* basis of our thinking. To the contrary, I have presented arguments for differences in experiences among people of different languages, as well as different cultures and times! Indeed, perhaps I need

to clarify my position. I do not believe in a universal factor influencing all people in history in the same way. Instead, I think that (1)(which is less important for our purposes) these factors are *common* in the sense that ever since the invention of language, it has always influenced our thought and the cultural and historical context has always done so (I attempted to prove that it is necessary for an existing language and our cultures to *always* influence our thoughts above; polysemy exists always, so it always lead to finding new connections in the world, and there is always some historical context in which one lives and humans always have to answer certain questions, because it is impossible for one person to attain a good knowledge of everything, since both the time and space of one person are limited), (2) they are *common* in the sense that they do not concern merely individual people, but always a larger community, for example the users of a given language or people of a certain nationality. However, they do not concern every human being. (1) has been proven, let's prove (2). Much of the proof results from what I have written above. In terms of the language: of course, if you're a person speaking any language, it is not up to you, in what language you will be educated, i. e. – what connections between polysemic worlds will be exactly presented to you, which ones will thus shape your thinking. And every person born in a place where a given language is used is in the same situation. Thus, we may reasonably expect that – so to speak – the *logos* will be indeed common at that level, since everyone learning to speak a given language will be exposed to more or less the same connections (the same factors influencing thinking in that regard). In terms of the culture, it is the same thing. It is not up to you, what questions you will have to answer, what exactly will be the main problems of your time. Again, we can expect them to be similar for any person living in a given culture, since most people living in a given culture are exposed to a very similar array of cultural texts, philosophical ideas *etc.* (Indeed, the existence of such a canon of important texts and relevant questions is oftentimes considered to be one of the things that *make* a culture, i. e. without which a culture cannot even exist!). This, then, is also not dependent on the individual. Although I have already pointed to cultural and linguistic differences which make the idea of an entirely universal (for absolutely everyone) *logos* unconvincing, I will now present one additional argument against such an idea. Noam Chomsky famously argued that each human being possesses an innate (inborn) grammatical ability. What this would mean is that each of us has an inborn competence which allows us to learn language. Generativists – followers of Chomsky – have never reached an agreement, what would this competence consist of, but we could present some examples. For instance, there's the grammatical idea of a subject, which – according to some generativists – can be found in every language. Furthermore, the idea of *some* inborn grammatical skills, regardless of what they would be exactly, seems to be – again, according to followers of Chomsky – supported by (among other arguments) the fact that everyone learns language surprisingly easily and surprisingly quickly, and moreover the process of learning a language by a child is very similar among people of different languages. However, both of these arguments are false and for both of these convincing counterarguments have been offered by cognitive linguists. First of all, the idea of a subject is a bad example of a concept universal to all languages, because some languages do not, in fact, have such a category. Secondly, learning a language is not effortless for a child. To the contrary – even if we presumed that a child learns a language for eight hours daily from the age of 1 to 5, then a child would be exposed to language input for over 11,000 hours during the process! And this is not too bold of an assumption to make, especially that we know that certain forms of linguistic development begins before the age of 1 (infants only a day old are already sensitive to certain words – Gallagher and Zahavi in *The*

Phenomenological Mind refer to a study which shows that such infants prefer to listen to stories which they heard during the pregnancy, so when they hadn't even been born!). Finally, the process of learning different languages turns out not to be so similar at all. For example, an average English child learns to use the passive voice when aged four or five. A child speaking Hebrew, however, learns to do so only when aged eight! (Again, on average). This proves that the same constructions are learnt at different moments in various languages, which makes the idea of universal grammar even less believable, since such a grammar would supposedly contain dispositions to learn certain structures at a given age. Thus, universal grammar doesn't exist, but linguistic factors differ from culture to culture. Taken together with the fact that linguistic or cultural factors seem to influence all people belonging to a given community in basically the same way, it makes us able to infer that the *common* logos is indeed common, so these very real external factors that shape our thinking are not up to the individual's choice, yet they are not completely universal, they are not absolutely „common“. Rather, the adjective „common“ could refer to particular national or linguistic communities.

THE MAJORITY

Heraclitus famously despised the masses. It is, then, not surprising that he wrote that most people are not aware of the fact that what he called the *logos* shapes their thought and that they are indeed not independent (in terms of their thinking). Is that merely a reflection of his attitude towards the majority or is it an accurate statement? I will now proceed with shorter arguments and answers, since these are questions less complex than the previous ones. It seems that most people are not fully aware of the fact that their thought is shaped by cultural and linguistic factors. Why do I say that? I reckon that a certain part of the attitude towards the world held by most people, and to some extent held by everyone – the „natural attitude“, to use Husserl's term – is the idea of free will. Why is this so? Every single one of us can move our hand during reading this text. If I write: „please wave to the computer on which you're reading this text“ - this can also be done easily. All of us, then, have a certain sense of liberty and free will, regardless of whether it's true. Even if our actions are not in fact free (but rather determined entirely by, for instance, physical causes) – they are nevertheless *perceived* as free, just like the hand movement is perceived as free. It is perceived as free, because I have a certain feeling of „mineness“ (I know that it was my body that performed the movement) and I feel that it was a result of my decision. This can hardly be proved conclusively on paper, since consciousness and the feeling of free will are first-person experiences. However, I will resort to the idea that it is obvious enough for everyone to know that they have such a feeling. I am aware that this is not a conclusive argument in itself; however, I think that this is as strong of an argument as strong as one may get when debating consciousness and the mind, since objective third-person descriptions are not possible in this case – my feeling of free will (be it true or false) is something that I myself feel and not something that I see in another person. If, however, it is also right that other people have such a feeling (and the only world available to my experience is one in which it is the case – other people seem to bear enough similarities to me that I do not see any reason to suppose they do not have it, and however I wanted, I cannot go beyond what my senses offer me, i. e. these people who are so similar to me, so I may suppose that they feel that their actions are free, are the only people which will ever be shown to me through the senses), then it follows that it would probably be very hard for them to believe that something they do is a result not of their action, but of an external factor. Obviously, the idea that our thinking is somehow influenced by language or culture, doesn't

endanger the idea of free will itself, since having a limited array of options to choose from (and both culture and language do exactly that – limit our choices, not choose for us) is not equal to not being able to choose at all. However, it seems that the majority of people are not educated in philosophical matters like that (it is a fact that only a small percentage of any population is interested in philosophy; this has always been the case – perhaps the most brutal demonstration of the general attitude towards philosophy may be Socrates' trial) and so they can oftentimes hardly differentiate between being devoid of free will and being influenced by external factors to some extent. Thus, the idea of Heraclitus in this regard seems to be correct.

...AND THE MINORITY

This will be a very short argument. The question number four I formulated at the beginning goes: are some people devoid of the belief that Heraclitus attributed to the majority? The answer is: yes. It is self-evident; since Heraclitus in the quote said that the *logos* is common, so everyone is influenced by it, he also admitted that he was influenced by it himself. Therefore, he did not share the idea of the majority, since he was well aware of the importance of the common *logos* for our thinking. Thus, at least one person was aware of this fact. It follows that there is someone, who did not believe in the absolute freedom of his thoughts.

ANY EXCEPTIONS?

Are some people not affected by the common *logos*? – that was question number five. It follows from what I have written above that my answer will be negative. Everyone has to learn a language, so certain polysemic words will impact everyone's cognition to some extent. Everyone has to live in a culture, which poses certain questions – and it shapes everyone's thoughts to a degree. Perhaps, however, we could make an exception for humans living hundreds of thousands of years ago. After all, they had no language and it is hard to say whether their groups created any „cultures“. This is up for discussion, but for now one thing is certain – all of us live in the present, not hundreds of thousands of years ago, and all of us are affected by the discussed external factors influencing our thinking. Everyone now has a language, everyone has a culture, and this has been the case for thousands and thousands of years.

A SUMMARY OF THE MAIN POINTS

Let's read the quote from Heraclitus once again after this long philosophical journey. „Although the *logos* is common, most people live as though they had their own thought“. „The common *logos*“, which can be understood as both linguistic and non-linguistic external factors which shape the thinking of everyone to some extent, does indeed exist. Both language and culture or history influence our thoughts to a considerable degree, either by way of showing us certain connections between things denoted by the same word, or by way of forcing us to respond to the questions of a given time. However, Heraclitus' quote requires a certain addition. The *common logos* does indeed exist, yet it is not exactly the same for everyone everywhere. While the general processes shaping our thoughts have remained more or less the same ever since the advent of culture and language, the specifics vary from culture to culture, from language to language –and they vary considerably. However, they remain basically identical for larger groups of people – not the group of all people ever, but nevertheless large groups, such as nationalities. What about the second part of the quote? Most people indeed seem not to be able to abandon the idea of forming their thoughts

entirely independently from any external factors; this may be understood as a result of the confusion of the concepts of free will and being free from any influence whatsoever, as well as the internal feeling of free will that everyone seems to have. It is, however, certain that some people are conscious of the influence of what Heraclitus calls the common *logos*, which is implied in the quote itself. Nevertheless, even if they are conscious of that, it seems that they cannot escape its influence, since it is something that determines everyone everywhere – at least ever since the advent of humanity as we know it (or even earlier). Overall, the *logos* seems to be common, but not exactly absolute – or, specifically, absolute in the sense that it determines the thoughts of everyone to some extent, but definitely not absolute in the sense that it determines *everything* – as we have seen, for instance, the radical version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, i. e. complete linguistic determinism, is unacceptable, because following it leads to internal contradictions in the concept of language. Common yet not absolute, or perhaps: common yet not entirely common, absolute yet not entirely absolute – this quote from Heraclitus, whose metaphysics was based on oppositions and contradictions, seems at first to be somewhat contradictory as well. I hope, however, that my explanation of these seeming contradictions was clear enough to show their true internal unity and sense – and expand on the ideas of Heraclitus, using more contemporary debates in science and philosophy.