# Language, institution and person

## Lenguaje, institución y persona

Gustavo Alfredo Agüero*
*Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Córdoba, Argentina*
*gus.aguero@unc.edu.ar*
*Orcid number: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1468-4856*

### Abstract

The reflexive effort proposed is aimed at investigating two concepts that make up the core of our constitution as rational beings, i.e., as people, we refer to thought and language. The idea is to contemplate this relation under a somewhat different perspective from those that are usually presented in the literature that circulates through the main bibliography, which usually come from psychology, linguistics and, increasingly, from neurosciences. A look is proposed here that emphasizes the relation of these concepts with different regions of the conceptual space that we inhabit, which opens reflexive area that are revealed when we give the chance to review or question certain assumed or inherited understandings about said concepts. This journey goes through strong statements, sometimes intentionally careless and free of nuances, which above all seek provocation, open debates, reactions and new productions, before taking care of the style and coverage of all the flanks. It does not resist humor or everyday text, it exposes, i.e., it tries to open rather than close the conversation. People are complex beings, beings of institutions, of language, we are not bodies nor are we inside them; our limits are not cut in space but, without a doubt, they go beyond our body.

### Keywords

Language, institution, person, community, rationality, norm.

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* Degree in Philosophy. PhD. in Philosophy. Professor of Introduction to Philosophical Thought and Assistant Professor of Philosophy of Language at the National University of Córdoba. He currently directs research projects at the National University of Córdoba and the National University of San Luis (Argentina). He has taught courses and lectures in several Latin American countries.

Resumen

El esfuerzo reflexivo que aquí se propone se orienta a indagar sobre dos conceptos que se encuentran en el núcleo de nuestra constitución como seres racionales, es decir, como personas, nos referimos al pensamiento y al lenguaje. Lo que se busca, ante todo, es contemplar ese vínculo bajo una mirada un tanto diferente de las que suelen presentarse en la literatura que circula por los principales circuitos bibliográficos, que suelen provenir de la psicología, la lingüística y cada vez más de las neurociencias. Proponemos aquí una mirada que enfatice el vínculo de estos conceptos con regiones diferentes del espacio conceptual que habitamos, lo que abre instancias reflexivas que se revelan en su máxima expresión cuando revisamos o cuestionamos ciertas comprensiones asumidas o heredadas sobre estos conceptos. Este recorrido transita por afirmaciones fuertes, a veces intencionalmente descuidadas y libre de matices, que ante todo buscan provocación, abrir debates, reacciones y nuevas producciones, antes que el cuidado del estilo y la cobertura de todos los flancos. No se resiste al humor ni al texto cotidiano, se expone, en definitiva, trata de abrir antes que de cerrar la conversación. Las personas somos seres complejos, seres de las instituciones, del lenguaje, no somos cuerpos ni estamos dentro de ellos; nuestros límites no se recortan en el espacio pero, sin lugar a dudas, van más allá de nuestro cuerpo.

Palabras clave

Lenguaje, institución, persona, comunidad, racionalidad, norma.

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## Introduction

Understanding a philosophical discourse is not always, or almost never, a simple task. Philosophy, like many other activities, requires conceptual training; but what distinguishes philosophy from many other activities is its role in culture, or perhaps we should say, the intense discussion that is often opened about its role in culture. In any case, what philosophy or reflective practice should not be allowed to indulge is superficiality and lack of authenticity.

People who reflect on what we are and what we do, on what we think and feel, i.e., people who philosophize sometimes seek, as part of a broader task, to explain the concept in which, unknowingly and unwittingly, we members of a linguistic community are generally immersed. We can say that, as rational, we are conceptually constituted beings, which is not unlike saying that we are the kind of beings who can understand, who are exposed to changes in our ways of thinking and feeling, changes that can be seen as part of a process of conceptual redesign. We are thinking beings whose lives are constructed, transformed, and sometimes also unmoored according to the scope of our understandings and the value of our decisions.

What then motivates reflective practice? Why do we make such questions and requests? This is also a matter for reflection, a task that will always have to be carried out with others, practiced in dialogue, as Socrates said twenty-five centuries ago. But if make sense to those ques-

tions, perhaps it would be best to start from the obvious fact that we are beings who attach value to things, who consider that there are better and worse things that can happen, who understand that there are good and bad situations that can be faced, who perceive that there are justice and injustice, we are, in short, beings who inhabit a world in which facts can be described through value judgments and valued through descriptions. We reflect because things can be favorable for us and for the environment that constitutes us and that we constitute, but they can also be toxic and destructive. We do not have an infallible standard of measurement for our decisions and actions, because we value things that are not always the same. Some of the concepts that we claim to be essential to the culture of our contemporary societies, such as education, democracy, and pluralism, are the result of such a view.

What can we expect from such reflective practice? What we expect from many of the practices[1] instituted in our community is a collaboration to improve the quality of life of the community and its members, but specifically we expect to achieve a better understanding of ourselves, what we are, what we want and what we do not want for ourselves. We aspire to a better version of our rationality, one that includes the limitations and inconsistencies of our emotional life. When reflection is sustained and deepened, it can lead to the strongest truisms losing their obviousness and showing other narrative possibilities, even when such an opening can lead to another enclosure that requires a new beginning.

The reflective effort proposed is oriented to investigate two concepts that are at the core of our constitution as rational beings, i.e., as people, we refer to thought and language. The aim is to is to see a relationship under a somewhat different perspective from the one usually presented in the literature, which usually comes from psychology, linguistics and, increasingly, from neurosciences. We propose a look that emphasizes the relation of these concepts with different regions of the conceptual space we inhabit, which opens reflective aspects that are revealed when we review or question certain assumed or inherited, but in any case, firmly naturalized, understandings about these concepts.

As a form of conceptual exercise, we can assume that what motivates philosophers to ask about the relationship between the concepts of thought and language is the suspicion that this relationship can provide with a better understanding of the relation between individuals and the community. Part of the task proposed is to show the meaning of this assumption.

## Basically rational

Addressing the concepts of thought and language is not a minor issue in the effort of conceptual clarification done by philosophy if we have already assumed the condition of rationality. This condition is not something that we have found or perhaps obtained by means of some empirical investigation and that, therefore, we can one day abandon or replace without further ado by some other condition. Our understanding of ourselves as rational beings describes us, but at the same time constitutes us. Rationality, a feature of every linguistic being is the game in which our lives are played, but as a game, it is a practice in which we can educate ourselves, i.e., improve as players[2]. Although rational beings can be described in the same way as many sportsmen, namely, "anyone plays, but not everyone plays well". Even though we play every day, we do not always reach our goals or expectations, nor do we always meet the expectations that others have of us. While it is true that we do not bathe twice in the same river, as Heraclitus understood, this does not mean that we should leave our education in the fate of destiny; not any change or transformation that a person may have can always be valued positively. Sometimes life takes us to unenlightened paths, leads us to destinations we would not have wished for, and makes of us superficial, insensitive people. We not only need to be other people, but to be the people we need, for this we educate ourselves; we would like to avoid at all costs to see ourselves one day claiming from the previous versions of ourselves the little or no importance they have assigned to their heirs.

Anyone is rational, but being rational does not mean behaving according to the results of applying a formula or an algorithm, there is no such thing, we have to make decisions and act. We want to be better people, which means, to use an Aristotelian tone, to be better in the role of being a person. We want to master the game, but sometimes things do not work out and not infrequently we fail, if not as individuals we fail as a community, which is also a failure of all.

Let us be certain that our life does not depend on the application of a formula and in this sense, we try to learn to play the game or games in our community, but we must consider as a fact that there are attempts against our own dignity, the fact that in our own community there are people living unfavorable conditions. In most cases these conditions are the result of community life and can therefore be modified; whether this happens will depend on the rationality of some other people, or rather, it will depend on the ways in which other people exercise their rationality. We can then think of rationality as an exercise, something that is prac-

ticed, something that is not exercised when the community marginalizes some of its members by dragging them into inhuman living conditions; this, in different ways, does not affect only some sectors of the community, it affects all of us in our quality of life. Therefore, there are circumstances in which rationality must not be sought in the individual behavior of the most vulnerable members, but elsewhere; it must be demanded from others, but insistently from those who assume the responsibility of making this a fairer, more democratic community.

A community that limits and excludes some of us by making its living conditions extreme is a community that urgently needs to rethink itself, that needs to 'deconstruct' itself. In such conditions, it is not rationality that needs to be questioned, but its exercise, just as we do not question teaching, political, artistic, trade union, business activity, but the ways in which these activities are exercised. Our lives do not respond to an algorithm, although they do respond to rules or norms; we are rational and this means that we can understand what we do, we can see ourselves as reasoning beings, as logical beings; what we question is not the game of rationality itself, nor its rules, but how we play it.

We could then say that being rational is not a sufficient condition to be reasonable; therefore, in the game of rationality what makes us reasonable, sensible, better people is the way we play. Anyone is rational, but... It is then worth taking up again those words of Hannah Arendt (2003), regarding Eichmann, "No, Eichmann was not stupid. It was only pure and simple thoughtlessness - which in no way can we equate with stupidity - that predisposed him to become the greatest criminal of his time" (p.171).

## Speaking of institutions

Both what we perceive and think, as well as what we say and do, has a conceptual content, something that can be made explicit or enunciated by means of a judgment, as we do when we say 'I saw that two people with luggage came in' or, 'I am not sure, but I believe that they are married'. In the first case, the propositional content of the perceived 'two people with luggage entered' is made explicit and in the second case the propositional content of the believed or thought 'they are married', is made explicit. Similarly, the propositional content of an action such as 'he set the fire by accident' can be stated. To be able to establish the content of the acts of an individual is the only way to understand his behavior, but also the condition to be satisfied to be able to evaluate it.

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In short, it can be said that it is the conceptual nature of the content of our thoughts and acts that makes rationality possible; in other words, our lives are ordered, projected, and transformed according to regimes and processes of a conceptual nature. For this reason, we say that we are conceptual beings:

> Concepts, which govern our thinking, are not simply a matter of the intellect. They also govern our daily functioning to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we move in the world, how we relate to other people. So, our conceptual system plays a central role in defining our everyday realities (Lakoff & Johnson, 2004, p. 39).

In either way, when we speak of concepts we are not speaking of certain words, such as giraffe, tree, or window, which could well be understood as names of concepts. But as Lakoff and Johnson say, concepts govern our intellect and our perception and then we infer that we are not talking about certain words, nor about the form we give to the 'raw material' provided by the senses, in which we could think of the reality of a non-conceptualized raw material. Our perception is conceptual, but this does not mean that concepts constitute the formal input of the rational mind to the material of perception. There are other ways of thinking about concepts, ways that allow us to see more clearly the relation that individuals have with the community, i.e., the relation between thought and language.

To begin the journey let us recover a well-known fragment of someone who has reflected on the matter, Donald Davidson (1990), who focusing on the concepts of belief and truth affirms, "Belief is constructed to fill the gap between sentences considered true by individuals and true (or false) according to public standards. Belief is private, not because it is accessible to a single person, but because it may be idiosyncratic" (p.162).

There is in this passage the appeal to a double conceptual binomial; on the one hand, the public/private binomial that helps us to understand how individual thought is cut on the background of social practices set in a community. On the other hand, there is an implicit use of the true/false binomial belief.

We begin by addressing the concept of social practice to avoid taking the path that leads to contrast between individual belief and collective belief. It is not a question of approaching the matter as if it were a matter of consensus to finally counterpose the belief of the majorities to individual belief, which would leave us with no more tools than those of contractualism to understand our own constitution. Something that could well be highlighted in Davidson's text is the fact that even though

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the linguistic community and its norms are an authentic artifice, a product of collective arbitration, the possibility of error arises with it, the possibility of saying or believing that things are different from the way they are. This shows that error is not the product of the accurate adjustment between language and the world, or between individual sentences and beliefs and the way the world is, but between individual´s behavior and the norm that defines the community itself. Thus, adjusting sentences and beliefs in search of 'truth' is also an expression of the desire to be part of the community, to give validity to its norms. In all this are the words of Stanley Cavell:

> The philosophical appeal to what we say and the search for our criteria from which we say what we say are claims of the community. And the claim of the community is always a search for the bases upon which it could be or has been established (Cavell, 1979, p.20).

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Now, to formulate the question about the relationship between thought and language, it would be necessary to begin by being clear about the concepts involved. Just as in order to ask ourselves what relationship exists between Vladimir Putin and Volodimir Zelenski, we should at least know, perhaps as a condition for the question to arise, who these people are, i.e., who we are talking about. In the same way, the question about the relationship between the morning star and the evening star could hardly arise if we did not know with a certain approximation, or perhaps if we did not think we knew what we were talking about, let alone that the matter requires a previous reading of Frege's 'Meaning and Reference'.

Here is where we start covering some parts of the conceptual framework in which thought and language are located[3]. In the first place, we could say that when we use the concept of language we are not talking about an object or a set of objects, we are not talking about a code or a set of signs that enable us to communicate. We are not speaking of a convention nor of a resource that we develop for communicating our thoughts to others, as if our thoughts were hidden from them while they are evident to each of us, or at any rate and to be rigorous, as if my thoughts were evident to me, who am a thing that knows that I think, while the situation is not so clear to me in the case of others. Even so, I will not let this suspicion about the existence of other things or thinking beings take away my desire to go ahead with these reflections.

When I speak of language, I should say (so as not to commit anyone to this), I am speaking of an institutional configuration[4], so that we do not say that we possess language, but that we inhabit the linguistic

space. This institutional configuration occurs, as in any institution, in social practices that guide the behavior of the members of the community, without losing sight of the fact that to speak of community means to speak of an institutional configuration. As the German philosopher Hartmut Kliemt states, human societies clearly differ from animal societies, just as states differ from insect groups; clearly, human social coexistence is essentially based on organizations created by men, and we call these organizations social institutions (Kliemt, 1998, p. 13). Therefore, the concept of community does not only refer to a group of individuals, but to the institutional character of this group and therefore to the presence of what many consider as an 'abstract' entity, and they consider it as it is understood that we can see, touch, and talk to people, but we cannot do such things with the community, nor with the university, nor with the clubs, etc. So, what is the reality of institutions? Let us recall that famous passage of Ryle's on categorical errors:

> A foreigner visiting Oxford or Cambridge for the first time is shown the *colleges*, libraries, sports fields, museums, scientific departments, and administrative offices. But then he asks: 'Where is the University? I have seen where the members of the *colleges* live, where the Registrar works, where the scientists do experiments, but I have not yet seen the University where its members live and work'. It must be explained to him, then, that the University is not another parallel institution or a sort of counterpart of the *colleges*, laboratories and offices. The University is the way everything he has seen is organized (Ryle, 2005, p. 17).

In this sense, institutions seem to have the intangibility of meanings, of what we do not see but we still know when it is there and when it is not; in the same way, institutions give meaning to a human group. An institution is a system of norms that regulates the behavior of a community, but not of a previously constituted community, as if it were a house or a building that is constructed to be inhabited, but rather the community is constituted as such by adopting a system of norms for itself.

How does a human group make the transition to community? The system of social practices that define a community or a culture is instituted to the extent that the behaviors of individuals become convergent, and individuals consciously begin to order themselves based on such convergences, which thus take on a normative aspect and nature. Let us recall that the idea of postulating a pact or contract would mean assuming a prior norm, language -which makes it possible to carry out such a pact or contract- in order to account for the way in which a norm is instituted;

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then, as John Searle says, "if we take language for a presupposition, we have already taken institutions for a presupposition".

Why would we accept the rules? Why would we accept the institution? Because of the desire to be part of the community, because we do not constitute ourselves as people outside the community, and we do not leave the community once we have entered it. One does not leave the community just by entering the woods like Henry Thoreau, a claim to leave that was not his own, nor is one part of the community by living in the city like Kaspar Hauser, according to legend. Accepting a norm means accepting the game and this implies awareness of the existence and validity of the norm or, in other words, commitment to the system or institution of which the norm is a part. The norm demands that the members of the community adjust or adapt their behavior, but it demands it rationally, in such a way that the norm can always be complied with or violated, this is a possibility that, in each case, is presented to every individual to assume responsible behavior.

The idea is to think that a community is an institution that has originated in a linguistic space, i.e., that it has been instituted fundamentally as a linguistic community. It is language that makes it possible to create senses, meanings, culture, community. We are saying that there is no community that is instituted outside language, so every community is a linguistic community. With respect to language, we can say something similar; we do not understand what we are talking about if when speaking of language we do not focus on social practices that shape a community; language is always in the community. In short, what we are simply saying is that we cannot understand the concept of community without understanding the concept of language and vice versa.

## The footprint of the believer

We will return to the text of Davidson to mention that the concept of belief is a concept that can only be used in the framework of a normative system, i.e., it is a concept that can be attributed to those individuals who intend to adapt their behavior to the norms set in their communities. This, of course, is neither a whim nor the mere exhibition of an anthropocentric spirit, but is the result of the attitude of rationality, an attitude that must necessarily be adopted towards the members of a linguistic community to be able to interpret their behavior in terms of actions, i.e., to give some meaning to their behavior[5]. In this way, an individual is a true believer to

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the extent that his behavior can be understood against the background of the norms that constitute his community, just as an individual is a tennis player to the extent that his behavior can be understood in terms of the actions and intentions that define the practice of playing tennis, i.e., the norms that regulate the game. Similarly, an individual is a cook if his behavior can be understood in terms of actions and intentions that define the practice of cooking. In this sense we say that belief, like the other psychological concepts in terms of which we understand a person's behavior, constitutes a key piece in the game of rationality, a game that we begin to play from the moment we enter the linguistic community. Hence, our behaviors can be seen as rational actions insofar as they are interpreted as carrying out, or at least intending to carry out, certain social practices.

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As in the case of institutions, we cannot see a person's beliefs, desires and other mental or psychological states... but they are there, giving meaning to their behaviors. We do not see people's minds as we see their bodies and their behaviors, neither do we see the meaning of the ink used to write the pages of a book, nor do we hear the meaning in the words that someone pronounces. Meaning is not, as mentioned by Ryle, referring to categorical errors, something we will encounter in the world just as we encounter tables, chairs, cell phones, apples, and sandwiches. As Charles Peirce (1988) said of rules, "(...) they have no existence at all, even though they have a real being consisting in the fact that existents will conform to it" (p.154).

What Peirce affirms for rules could also be said of any normative or institutional phenomenon, namely, that there is nothing concrete or abstract that can be identified with the rule, with the norm or with the institution, beyond what is observed in the behavior of the individuals who express it. However, we do not distrust the existence of meanings any more than we distrust the existence of rules or institutions even when we can only observe buildings, offices, libraries, individuals, etc. On this point Peirce also said:

> We have seen that thought can only be known through external facts. Therefore, the only thought that can be known is thought in signs. A thought that cannot be known does not exist. All thought must, therefore, be in signs (Peirce, Ch. (Ch. 5.251) [6].

If we understand Peirce's 'thoughts' as our meanings, norms or institutions, we realize that that there are no meanings that are not expressed in things such as actions or products of actions, such as ink or paint marks, sounds, light indicators, and so on. There are no thoughts or meanings that

do not 'take body' in observable things or facts. We should also say that our thoughts are expressed in actions, i.e., in the practices we perform or try to perform. Our thoughts are hidden, they are not kept in our heads or elsewhere, nor are they so exposed to us; our thoughts have the substance of meanings, of norms, of institutions, of actions and of people.

Nor is it the case that my thoughts must somehow be guessed by others or that when doubting as to whether my thoughts are these or those, there is something beyond my behavior, whose consultation can clear it up. My thoughts, like those of any other believer, are the result of the interpretation of my behavior in a background of social practices.

## What were the facts?

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We had said that we could consider the community or linguistic community as the first institution but, at the same time, as the institution that makes the others possible. To affirm that the linguistic community is the first institution is equivalent to saying that nothing is instituted outside language, since institutional life requires, on the part of its members, a particular type of consciousness that can only be admitted in a linguistic setting[7]. To try to address the point we could use a well-known reflection of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1988) about the nature of language, "to understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to master a technique" (§ 199).

What does Wittgenstein claim here? That understanding a play in a game is conditioned to understanding the game. Let us suppose that a spectator is in the lower part of a stadium watching a soccer game and observes with some displeasure that in the fifteenth minute of the second half the referee decides to award a penalty kick against his team[8]. Only a person with a certain degree of understanding of the game can complain, loudly, obviously, that the defender reaches the ball before the striker and tries to explain to his anonymous companion that it is the striker who seeks contact and not the defender who provokes it. The spectator would not be able to see, discuss and comment on the play if he did not understand the game as a whole. Why is this so? Because the set of rules or norms that define the game constitutes a system, a logical plot, in such a way that understanding one rule presupposes understanding others, or in other terms, one can only understand the rules if one understands the rules. Let us bear in mind that understanding a game or a particular rule should not be thought of as understanding a written text or a set

of instructions[9], but as the condition to which our spectator has access, someone who can see the game and perhaps also play it[10], which means being able to see it. If language is a system, then understanding a part of the system means understanding the system.

A rather more hermetic way of saying what Wittgenstein said is by mentioning that we only have something if we have something else. When this principle is applied to our multiple descriptions and stories that give content to the reality we inhabit, it turns out that we cannot only account for a fact, for example, the fact that there is a glass on the table. To see that there is a glass on the table requires certain conditions, among them, to know that something is a glass, to know that something is a table, to know when x can be said to be on y, also to know that such conditions are present at this moment. But knowing that something is a glass and that something is a table implies knowing that something is a device designed for drinking and something else is an artifact designed for carrying out every day activities such as eating and drinking in rituals we call breakfast, lunch, and dinner, for example, but which is also often used for work, homework, writing essays, playing poker and other board games, and many other activities as well. These are some of the things that one who claims that there is a glass on the table should know, and of course, one who knows these things knows many other things that are a condition for knowing these and so the chain extends to the condition of inhabiting a world. We say that we only have something if we have something else; we do not have a habitable world in which there are only one or two facts, this means that such a world is not possible and if it were possible, it would not be like us who would inhabit it. What this brings out is the concept of system that defines every institution such as language or community, as we said; neither part has meaning by itself, in which case we would have a hard time understanding how such meaning is acquired. To add psychedelic images to the matter, let us think of a child who is beginning to speak but who for the moment only uses one or two words, whose vocabulary is a couple of words, and who, in using them, knows perfectly well what he is saying.

Narrating events, explaining, arguing, conversing, understanding, etc., are activities that require a complex institutional framework. Events are produced, observed, described as a figure on a normative background, and in our case this horizon is conceptual. We could not even have elaborated the concept of reality if we were not inhabitants of language; however, this does not mean that reality is a product of our unbridled fantasy as linguistic beings and not even a construction free of all conditioning.

In any case, it must be said, along with Willard Quine (2002), that "what there is in the world does not depend on our use of language, but what there is depends on it" (p.158). This makes us believe that our ontological commitments, which counts as reality, cannot be contracted without the practice of making statements, of telling what the facts are.

We reintroduce the idea of *seeing* to ask ourselves about the game we attended but did not get to *see*, the one where our understanding was zero, where we only saw people running around, jumping, and kicking a ball. What there is, for us game-blind people, in our world is anything but a soccer game. The fact of not being able to see the game means we cannot see the plays, the infractions, corner kicks, penalties, goals, etc., and if instead of having a blind man watching the crowd screaming and cheering, it would be a blind crowd watching just one person doing it, perhaps they would think the guy was deranged. This is not meant to be a plea for insanity but rather to point out that there is something 'in the world' that one is evidently missing in that one is not seeing what others seem to be seeing (if one intends to remain steadfast in the skeptical attitude).

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Can one learn to perceive, i.e., to *see* the game? In fact, all those who can see the game have learned to do so at some point, they were not born knowing or being able to see. Even one can continue to learn to *see* all one's life, there is no end point in this. Just as in the realm of scientific knowledge there is no arrival point at which we close our eyes and can say, "we have finally come to know how things really are."

Our purpose at this point is to account for something inferentially connected with the preceding reflection and that is the fact that seeing, being aware of something like a soccer game is a conceptual or linguistic matter, as Wilfrid Sellars (1971) says "All awareness of types, facts, etc., in a word, all awareness of abstract entities - indeed, all awareness - is a linguistic matter" (p.140).

It can be inferred that Sellars means that consciousness is a linguistic, institutional phenomenon and not, for example, a biological one, but on the other hand he could be affirming that what we are conscious of always has a linguistic or conceptual format, i.e., that the type of consciousness we have is linguistic or conceptual. The consciousness we refer to is always of something as something; of something such as an animal, a chair, a plant, a clock, etc. Perception, as a conceptual ability, not only allows us to classify between what is cold and what is hot when it meets our body, but also to make sense by classifying under concepts.

Now, why would Sellars say that all consciousness of facts is a linguistic matter and not, for example, a matter of biology or neurobiology?

It is not infrequently assumed that the kind of consciousness that is usually referred to as self-consciousness is a particular kind of consciousness, of a higher level or of a different character than simple fact-consciousness. In this way, it is assumed that some living beings located at the top of the evolutionary pyramid would have managed to develop a form of consciousness that could be called consciousness of the world, of facts, etc., but they would have been surpassed by others even more evolved that would have managed to develop a consciousness of themselves, i.e., a consciousness of the world in which they are, but they know it now. In short, self-consciousness or self-awareness is not a new form of consciousness but consciousness focused on oneself. How can we think that we could be conscious of something -of facts, of things- without being at the same time conscious of ourselves? It would perhaps be a selective consciousness with a particular type of blindness, one that would only remove blindness from the perceptual horizon. It is precisely this characteristic feature of our consciousness that defines it and authorizes us to think that an individual who does not perceive himself not only acts but does not have the type of consciousness that we people have attained.

In short, perhaps it is the conceptual or linguistic nature of our consciousness or awareness that explains why some can and others cannot *see* a game, a movie, a text, in short, a fact. As Quine, if we cannot *see* or *say* that something happens then such (hypothetical) events will not appear when we tell our story. But one would still like to ask, are there events of which we were not or are not aware? There are only two answers for this, as for many other things that could be correct, one affirmative and one negative. The affirmative is the result of the historical or perspective view, the one that affirms that radioactivity had its effects even though, before 1896, the year of Henri Becquerel's discovery, nobody knew about radioactive processes. The negative is the result of the conceptual gaze, what we cannot *see* will not be part of the world we inhabit when we make an inventory of what is there. In this second sense we can say that it is our conceptual or theoretical developments, developments that do not necessarily mean progress, that alter the world. In short, under the conceptual gaze facts do not seem independent of our histories, of our consciousness, of our understanding. There are facts to the extent that we can or are in a position to account for them; to suppose otherwise would commit us to the idea of facts that can be considered or described by beings who have concepts and theories that we do not have, or who perhaps have only the right theories, but then those beings are not part of our community, they are not and will not be us.

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The image of the game adopted many times in the history of philosophy makes us see more clearly at least two very surprising things; firstly, that language can be seen as a normative space, and it is so insofar as we realize that entering the linguistic community is entering an institution, and this does not only mean mastering norms or living according to them, but that it is a constitutive process[11]. Secondly, and linked to the above, the relationship between fact and norm is one of dependence. We will try to explain this.

Going back to Quine's point, what if we cannot say what is there? We are not posing the hypothetical situation of being in a country whose native language we do not know and where we do not know how to ask about the university. It is the situation we are, when, perhaps in an exotic country, we see a group of people behaving strangely, shouting, jumping, pushing, and shoving, coming and going, throwing themselves on the ground and quickly getting up, walking slowly and sometimes running, and then one of the subjects, perhaps noticing our particular aspect of foreignness, approaches us and pushes us repeatedly. What is this all about? Is it a game? Is it a ritual? Is it a fight and we are invited to fight? Is it some kind of political debate? What should we do in such a situation? We do not know, but... how to describe what we see? Well, we already did and that is all, or at least that is all we see. Are we missing something? Possibly. Maybe it is a game or a sport whose rules we do not know. Well, what can we say there is? No more than what we said, and maybe there is nothing more; what we can be sure of is that there will be no more than this in our best description of the world. If we cannot see a set of actions in those behaviors that derive meaning from being the conduction or actualization of certain practices, from conforming to certain norms, then we have nothing, and saying that we have nothing is saying that we have neither the actions nor the facts, if there are any. It is not a matter of denying that such events are happening given our impossibility of seeing them, but of ignoring their existence altogether and therefore that we cannot include them in a more complete description of the world. Our description will be devoid of such events, which reveals, as we anticipated, the relationship of dependence between fact and norm, i.e., between fact and institution.

## Institutional world

Perhaps it can be anticipated, from the preceding reflections, that what can be thought about people is intimately related to what we have said

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about facts or descriptions of the world. Indeed, people do not constitute as such outside the linguistic or conceptual universe, which means that we are literally linguistic or conceptual beings. This seems to be a truism, and it is, but what is not so obvious is that we are literally linguistic or conceptual beings. Let us see how to clarify it.

What does it mean that people are constituted as such in the linguistic universe? It means that we would not be rational or thinking beings if we did not belong to that universe. We need to see Victor de Aveyron[12] to understand what the linguistic community represents. Being part of the institution of language does not only mean learning to write and read, not even the mother tongue, it means acquiring a conceptual constitution, which means perceiving, thinking and acting in a word, becoming rational. People are the kind of being that can only emerge in a linguistic universe. To ask ourselves if there is 'intelligent life' somewhere else in the universe is to ask if there are conceptual beings elsewhere, if perhaps the linguistic institution occurs elsewhere in the universe. To be part of the normative space of rationality already means to possess a particular constitution that only people attain, or in other words, we become people when we attain such a constitution. Rational people are a particular class of beings, those for whom inferential practice is relevant. We are beings who have constituted ourselves as such in the inferential space in which reasons are the official currency, we give and ask other reasons for what they say and what they do, we seek reasons for what happens, we want to understand. We look for reasons to act, reasons more solid than those we achieved in the past, we seek to improve the rational support of what we believe and we are generally willing to oppose our reasons to those of others. Sometimes we also abandon our reasons because we consider them weak and adopt other more solid or we simply run out of reasons to think what we think or do what we do, but this is not something that happens often, unfortunately. Entering the space of the linguistic community is not simply mastering a few words but shaping a scheme of beliefs, desires, emotions, and other mental states.

If the linguistic community is not the result of a pact consciously made, it will have to be thought as an implicit contract or pact, i.e., as a convergence of behaviors. Contracts and institutions constituted explicitly derive from contracts and institutions constituted implicitly, as is the paradigmatic case of the linguistic community and of our own rationality, the system of norms instituted 'accidentally' by human beings that transformed them into people. Such rational institution is the *sine qua non* condition for perception, thought and action, i.e., the condition for

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the conceptual constitution. Being the kind of beings we are, has no justification, just as the norms that define it have no justification, just as the logic of our rationality does not claim to have any, since it is the result of an 'implicit contract', but what we make of ourselves once we have constituted ourselves as people will depend on the education we give ourselves, and that will need justification. The kind of conceptual constitution we seek for ourselves, as individuals and as a community, will need to be justified. Determining the concepts that will be central to our culture is something that has to be debated in a community.

## Conclusion

What we have said make up an allegedly philosophical text. As we said at the beginning, we reflect because our descriptions and evaluations, our thoughts and emotions might help us and the environments that constitute us, but they can also be toxic and destructive.

The objective has been once again to make some clarifications regarding certain concepts that are paramount to us, to our culture and to our constitution as the people we are. Philosophers or those of us who try to reflect on the issues that shape our individual life and our life in community have a great responsibility, which is perhaps no more than a form of civic responsibility, and that is to contribute to improving the living conditions of our community and that of its members.

People are not individual units, as are our bodies; we are beings of institutions, beings that inhabit normative wefts that contain and constitute us. Like a jigsaw puzzle, each person's life depends on the lives of others. Our limits are diffuse, we cannot say where they begin and where they end, sometimes they expand and sometimes they contract, and we only know that those limits go beyond our bodies.

## Notes

1   When speaking of practices, we will generally assume that we are speaking of the universe of significant behaviors in a community, which will allow us to recognize something as an action (or the performance of a practice) and not a simple movement.

2   One can be more or less adept at using concepts, but using concepts is an all or nothing matter, just as in the case of rationality we do not say that someone is half-rational, but rather that he is or she is not rational, even if he can be said to be unreflective.

3   It should be considered at this point that the relationship between thought and language has been approached from different parts of the literature, among which we must mention psychology, education, anthropology, linguistics, and, of course, philosophy.

4   When speaking of institutions, some authors also incorporate the concept of value along with the concept of norm or normative system; however, I believe that the values accepted by a group or an individual can also be expressed in normative terms. Consequently, when using the concept of institution, I try not to introduce more precisions than those of the normative system, firstly because they are not necessary for the reflection I am proposing and secondly to allow this concept to be embellished later with different nuances and uses that are proposed in the social sciences and in philosophy.

5   This does not mean that we do not have the right to extend our uses of some psychological concepts such as belief, desire, fear, etc., to find some meaning in the behavior of individuals who are not part of the linguistic community, such as animals or technological devices.

6   The citation is from Collected Papers 5, Book 2, Question 5. "Whether we can think without signs". We use the abbreviated format usually employed (Ch. 5.251). The translation of the original is mine.

7   This type of consciousness is conceptual consciousness, which some philosophers recognize to the sapient, as in the case of people, as opposed to the consciousness they recognize to the sentient, as in the case of animals.

8   The penalty, if necessary to clarify, is one of the unlimited possible situations in the development of the game.

9   The penalty, if necessary to clarify, is one of the unlimited possible situations in the development of the game.

10  The penalty, if necessary to clarify, is one of the unlimited possible situations in the development of the game.

11  In the following section we will see that being part of an institution is far from being a superficial matter.

12  In the following section we will see that being part of an institution is far from being a superficial matter.

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