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Language and political change

QUENTIN SKINNER

I

This volume is concerned principally with the relations between our changing political world and the changing language we use to describe and appraise it. While individual chapters trace these interconnections in a series of conceptual histories, in this opening essay I shall attempt in a more general way to consider what can be learned about the processes of political innovation by examining the changing meanings of words. This is of course a vast question, and in order to make it manageable I shall concentrate on one recent and highly influential study which has focused on the links between linguistic and political change. The work I have in mind – which I shall use as a stalking-horse in what follows – is Raymond Williams's *Keywords*.¹ It is Williams's central contention that a study of "variations and confusions of meaning" may help us to improve our understanding of matters of "historical and contemporary substance" (1976: 21; 1983: 24). If we take "certain words at the level at which they are generally used," he suggests, and scrutinize their developing structures of meaning "in and through historical time," we may be able "to contribute certain kinds of awareness" to current social and

¹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, paperback, 1976), reissued in a revised and expanded form by Fontana in 1983. My critique of the book originally appeared (under the title "The Idea of a Cultural Lexicon") in *Essays in Criticism*, July, 1979. For help with that version I remain greatly indebted to John Dunn, Susan James, Jonathan Lear, Christopher Ricks, and Richard Rorty. The present essay is a revision and extension of the (slightly altered) reprint of the 1979 article which appeared in *The State of the Language*, ed. L. Michaels and C. Ricks, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, pp. 562–78. I gratefully acknowledge their permission to publish it here in its revised form. Most of the claims in Williams which I criticized in 1979 and 1980 have been revised or deleted in Williams's 1983 edition. I have therefore given page references to both editions of his book.

political debates, and in particular an "extra edge of consciousness" (Williams 1976: 20–1; 1983: 23–4). But what precise kinds of awareness can we hope to attain from studying the histories of keywords? And how should we conduct our studies in order to ensure that this awareness is duly attained? These are the questions I should like to examine at somewhat greater length.

II

Before proceeding, however, we need if possible to neutralize one serious doubt. It might be objected that, in singling out "a shared body of words," we are focusing on the wrong unit of analysis altogether (Williams 1976: 13; 1983: 15). Williams's aim, he tells us, is to illuminate "ways not only of discussing but at another level of seeing many of our central experiences" (1976: 12–13; 1983: 15). But if we wish to grasp how someone sees the world – what distinctions he² draws, what classifications he accepts – what we need to know is not what words he uses but rather what concepts he possesses.

It is true that this objection may appear a purely verbal one. For it might be replied – and the claim has often been made – that possessing a concept is equivalently a matter of knowing the meaning of a word. This certainly seems to be Williams's own view, for in discussing the term *nature* he equates "the word and the concept," and in speaking of *democracy* he explains how the "concept" is "embodied" in the word.³

However, to argue for any such equivalence is undoubtedly a mistake. First of all, it cannot be a necessary condition of my possessing a concept that I need to understand the correct application of a corresponding term. Suppose, for example, that I am studying Milton's thought, and want to know whether Milton considered it important that a poet should display a high degree of originality. The answer seems to be that he felt it to be of the greatest importance. When he spoke of his own aspirations at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*, what he particularly emphasized was his decision to deal with "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme." But I could

² Or she, of course. But in what follows I shall often allow myself the convenience of treating "he," "his," etc., as abbreviations, where appropriate, for "he and she," "his and her," etc.

³ Williams (1976: 84, 189). But in the later edition (1983: 95, 224), these claims are deleted, and in the new Introduction Williams (1983: 21) explicitly acknowledges "the difficult relations between words and concepts."

never have arrived at this conclusion by examining Milton's use of the word *originality*. For while the concept is clearly central to his thought, the word did not enter the language until a century or more after his death. Although a history of the word *originality* and its various uses could undoubtedly be written, such a survey would by no means be the same as a history of the concept of originality – a consideration often ignored in practice by historians of ideas.

Moreover, it cannot be a sufficient condition of my possessing a concept that I understand the correct application of a corresponding term. There is still the possibility (explored by Wittgenstein as well as Kant) that I may believe myself to be in possession of a concept when this belief is in fact mistaken. Consider for example the difficulties raised by certain highly general terms such as *being* or *infinity*. A whole community of language users may be capable of applying these terms with perfect consistency. Yet it might be possible to show that there is simply no concept which answers to any of their agreed usages.

What then is the relationship between concepts and words? We can scarcely hope to capture the answer in a single formula, but I think we can at least say this: the surest sign that a group or society has entered into the self-conscious possession of a new concept is that a corresponding vocabulary will be developed, a vocabulary which can then be used to pick out and discuss the concept with consistency. This suggests that, while we certainly need to exercise more caution than Williams does in making inferences from the use of words to the understanding of concepts and back again, there is nevertheless a systematic relationship between words and concepts to be explored. The possession of a concept will at least *standardly* be signalled by the employment of a corresponding term. As long as we bear in mind that "standardly" means neither necessarily nor sufficiently, I think we may legitimately proceed.

III

If our aim is to illuminate ideological disputes through the study of linguistic disagreements, the first issue we need to clarify – as Williams acknowledges – is obviously this: what exactly are we debating about a word when we find ourselves debating whether or not it ought to be applied as a description of a particular action or state of affairs?

Unfortunately, Williams's answer is confusingly vague. "What is really happening in such encounters," he claims, is a "process"

whereby "meanings are offered" and are then "confirmed, asserted, qualified, changed" (Williams 1976: 9; 1983: 11-12). All such debates are thus taken to be about "meanings"; about the "historical origins and developments" which have issued in the "present meanings" of the terms involved (Williams 1976: 13, 19-20; 1983: 15, 22-23).

This question-begging tendency to speak without further explication about "changes of meaning" is due, I believe, to the fact that Williams at no point tries to isolate and describe the class of terms in which he is chiefly interested – the class of what he calls the "strong" or "persuasive" words, the words which "involve ideas and values" (Williams 1976: 12, 15; 1983: 14, 17). No consistent account of how certain words come to "involve values" is ever presented. But it seems clear that, if any further progress is to be made in discussing the phenomenon of meaning change in ideological debates, the provision of such an analysis will have to be treated as a crucial preliminary step. As it happens, this is a less Herculean task than might be feared. A great deal of attention has lately been paid by theorists of language as well as moral philosophers to isolating and commenting on precisely these terms.⁴ Drawing on their accounts, we may say, I think, that three main requirements need to be met if such terms are to be understood and correctly applied.

First, it is necessary to know the nature and range of the criteria in virtue of which the word or expression is standardly employed. Suppose, for example, that I am unaware of the meaning of the appraisive term *courageous*, and ask someone to explain to me how to use the word properly. He (or she) will most naturally reply by mentioning various criteria that serve to mark off the word from similar and contrasting adjectives, and so provide it with its distinctive role in our language of social description and appraisal. When listing these criteria, he will surely have to include at least the following: that the word can be used only in the context of voluntary actions; that the actor involved must have faced some danger; that he must have faced it with some consciousness of its nature; and he must have faced it heedfully, with some sense of the probable consequences of the action involved. Summarizing these criteria (in what is only apparently a tautology), we may say that the conditions

⁴ Among moral philosophers I am most indebted to Foot (1958); Murdoch (1970); and the very illuminating comments in Hampshire (1959), especially pp. 195-222. Among philosophers of language, my approach owes most to the writings of Austin (1975); Wittgenstein (1959); and the analysis of Gottlob Frege's views presented in Dummett (1973a), especially pp. 81-109.

under which the term *courageous* can be applied are such that the action involved must have been a courageous one.

Next, to apply an appraisive term correctly I also need to know its range of reference. I need, that is, to have a clear sense of the nature of the circumstances in which the word can properly be used to designate particular actions or states of affairs. The concept of reference has often been taken to be an aspect or feature of the meaning of a word. But it is perhaps more helpful to treat the understanding of the reference of a word as a consequence of understanding the criteria for applying it correctly. To grasp these criteria is to understand the sense of the word, its role in the language, and thus its correct use. Once I have acquired this understanding, I may expect in consequence to be able to exercise the further and more mysterious skill of relating the word to the world. I may expect, for example, to be able to pick out just those actions which are properly to be called courageous, and to discuss the sort of circumstances in which we might wish to apply that particular description, or might wonder whether we ought to apply it rather than another one. For instance, someone might call it courageous if I faced a painful death with cheerfulness. However, it might be objected that strictly speaking no danger is involved in such circumstances, and thus that we ought not to speak of courage but rather of fortitude. Or again, someone might call it courageous if I stepped up from the circus audience to deputize for the lion tamer. But it might be countered that this is such a heedless action that it ought not to be viewed as courage but rather as sheer recklessness. Both these arguments are about the reference (but not the meaning) of *courageous*: both are concerned with whether a given set of circumstances – what a lawyer would call the facts of the case – are such as to yield the agreed criteria for the application of the given appraisive term.

To apply any word to the world, we need to have a clear grasp of both its sense and its reference. But in the case of appraisive terms a further element of understanding is also required. We need in addition to know what exact range of attitudes the term can standardly be used to express. (To adopt J. L. Austin's jargon: it is necessary to know what type of speech acts the word can be used to perform.) For example, no one can be said to have grasped the correct application of the adjective *courageous* if they remain unaware that it is standardly used to commend, to express approval, and especially to express (and solicit) admiration for any action it is used to describe. To call an action courageous is at once to describe it and

to place it in a specific moral light. Thus I can praise or rejoice at an action by calling it courageous, but I cannot condemn or sneer at it by describing it in this way.

If these are the three main things we need to know in order to isolate the class of appraisive terms and apply them correctly, we can now return to the question raised at the beginning of this section. I asked what we might be debating about a keyword if we found ourselves asking whether or not it ought to be applied in a particular case. As we have seen, Williams's answer is that such arguments must be about the senses or meanings of the words involved. As I have sought to show, however, we might be disagreeing about one of at least three different things, not all of which are self-evidently disagreements about meaning: about the criteria for applying the word; about whether the agreed criteria are present in a given set of circumstances; or about what range of speech acts the word can be used to perform.

IV

So far I have tried to isolate the main debates that arise over the application of our appraisive vocabulary to our social world. I turn now to what I take to be the crucial question: in what sense are these linguistic disagreements also disagreements about our social world itself?

I have suggested that one type of argument over appraisive terms centres on the criteria for applying them. Now this is certainly a substantive social debate as well as a linguistic one. For it can equally well be characterized as an argument between two rival social theories and their attendant methods of classifying social reality.

As an illustration of such a dispute, recall the way in which Marcel Duchamp liked to designate certain familiar objects (coat-pegs, lavatory bowls) as works of art, thereby causing them to be framed and hung on the walls of galleries. Some critics have accepted that these are indeed significant works of art, on the grounds that they help us to sharpen and extend our awareness of everyday things. Others have insisted that they are not works of art at all, on the grounds that we cannot simply *call* something a work of art, since works of art have to be deliberately created.

This disagreement arises at the linguistic level. It centres on whether or not a certain criterion (the exercise of skill) should or should not be regarded as a necessary condition for the correct application of a particular appraisive term (*a work of art*). But this is

certainly a substantive social dispute as well. What is at issue is whether or not a certain range of objects ought or ought not to be treated as having a rather elevated status and significance. And it is obvious that a great deal may depend on how this question is answered.

A number of the arguments in *Keywords* are primarily of this character. For example, the essays on "literature" and "science" largely fit this analysis, as does the useful discussion of "the unconscious," where Williams actually points out that "different theories" have generated "confusions between different senses" of the term (1976: 272; 1983: 322). Moreover, Williams is surely right to claim that in these cases the argument is in fact about the senses or meanings of the words involved. It is true that powerful voices have lately been raised against the contention that, if we introduce a new theory relating to a given subject matter (for example, what constitutes a work of art) this will inevitably give rise to changes in the meanings of the constitutive terms.⁵ And there is little doubt that Paul Feyerabend and other post-empiricists have tended to employ this assumption with an altogether excessive enthusiasm. Certainly we cannot readily say that every change of theory brings about a change in the meaning of all the words involved (if only because nouns and adjectives shift in meaning so much more readily than, say, conjunctions). Moreover, it seems unduly anarchistic to claim that the meaning of a word must have changed if we simply change our beliefs about whatever the word is customarily used to denote (although it is admittedly very hard to think of clear cases in which meanings have in fact remained constant in the face of changing beliefs).⁶ However, it does seem that if someone is mistaken about the criteria for applying a term, then he cannot be said to know its current meaning. And since I have argued that the question of whether Duchamp's coat-peg is a work of art is (at one level) an argument about the criteria for applying the term *a work of art*, I agree with Williams that in this type of argument about keywords the disagreement really is about the meaning of the word concerned.

What Williams misses, however, in his account of these disputes is

⁵ For an attack on this line of thought, see Putnam (1975).

⁶ Even Putnam's examples are unconvincing. In "How Not to Talk about Meaning," he takes the case of *gold*, and argues that the meaning of the word would not be affected if we found gold rusting, and were thus obliged to change our beliefs about the substance. This seems dogmatic. Would we really go on saying things like "as good as gold"? And if not, would we not have to concede that the meaning of *gold* had changed? (See Putnam 1975: 127-8.)

their almost paralyzingly radical character. He remains content to suppose that in all discussions about "meaning" we can "pick out certain words, of an especially problematical kind" and consider only "their own internal developments and structures."⁷ This fails to recognize the implications of the fact that a term such as *art* gains its meaning from the place it occupies within an entire conceptual scheme. To change the criteria for applying it will thus be to change a vast deal else besides. Traditionally, the concept of art has been connected with an ideal of workmanship, has been opposed to the "merely useful," has been employed as an antonym for *nature* and so on. If we now endorse the suggestion that an *objet trouve* or a manufactured article can count as a work of art, we at once sever all these and many other conceptual links. So an argument over the application of the term *art* is potentially nothing less than an argument over two rival (though not of course incommensurable)⁸ ways of approaching and dividing up a large tract of our cultural experience. Williams appears in short to have overlooked the strongly holistic implications of the fact that, when a word changes its meaning, it also changes its relationship to an entire vocabulary.⁹ What this tells us about such changes is that we must be prepared to focus not on the "internal structure" of particular words, but rather on their role in upholding complete social philosophies.

V

Even if we agree about the criteria for applying an appraisive term, I have suggested that a second type of dispute can arise over its use: a dispute about whether a given set of circumstances can be claimed to yield the criteria in virtue of which the term is normally employed. Again, such a disagreement will certainly be a substantive social one, not merely linguistic in character. For what is being contended in effect is that a refusal to apply the term in a certain situation may constitute an act of social insensitivity or a failure of social awareness.

As an illustration of this second type of argument, consider the

⁷ Williams (1983: 22-3), slightly revised from the earlier version (1976: 20). Williams (1983: 23) protests at the kind of reader who, in criticizing this approach, is "content to reassert the facts of connection and interaction from which this whole inquiry began." Williams's new Introduction is thus explicit about the problems posed by a holistic (and in that sense a skeptical) approach to "meanings." But I cannot see that the implications of this skepticism have been accommodated even in the revised version of his text.

⁸ Otherwise it is hard to see how the disputants could be *arguing*.

⁹ On this point see Dummett (1973b).

contention that wives in ordinary middle-class families at the present time can properly be described as suffering exploitation, as being an exploited class. The social argument underlying this linguistic move might be characterized as follows. It ought to be evident to all persons of goodwill that the circumstances of contemporary family life are such that this strongly condemnatory term does indeed (if you think about it) fit the facts of the case. Conversely, if we fail to acknowledge that the application of the term *exploitation* – in virtue of its agreed criteria – is indeed appropriate in the circumstances, then we are willfully refusing to perceive the institution of the family in its true and baleful light.

This is clearly a dispute of an entirely different character from the first type of argument I singled out. Nevertheless, there has been a persistent tendency among moral and political philosophers to conflate the two. Consider, for example, the analysis Stuart Hampshire offers in *Thought and Action* (1959: 197) of an imagined debate between a Marxist and a liberal in which the latter is "startled to find that actions of his, to which he has never thought to attach a political significance, in his sense of 'political,' are given a political significance" by his Marxist opponent. As the above quotation already indicates, Hampshire (1959: 196) classifies this kind of disagreement as one about the "sense" of the word "political"; as "a disagreement about the criteria of application" of the term. If this is a genuine argument, however, it is obviously crucial that the Marxist should be able to claim with some plausibility that he is employing the term in virtue of its *agreed* sense. It is not clear that he can even be said to be arguing with the liberal if he is simply content to point out that, as Hampshire (1959: 197) puts it, he has a different concept of "the political," with the result that he and the liberal are both confined to "the largely separated worlds of their thought." It is even less clear, if this is all that he wishes to point out, why the liberal should feel in the least affected by the argument, given that it amounts to nothing more than a declaration of an intention to use a certain appraisive term in an idiosyncratic way. If the Marxist is genuinely seeking to persuade the liberal to share or at least acknowledge some political insight, he needs in effect to make two points. One is of course that the term *political* can appropriately be applied to a range of actions where the liberal has never thought of applying it. But the other, which his application of the term challenges the liberal to admit, is that this is due not to a disagreement about the meaning of the term, but rather to the fact that the liberal is a person of blinkered political sensitivity and awareness.

The same confusion appears to afflict many of Williams's discussions about keywords. He gives historical examples of debates about, for example, whether a certain procedure can be appraised as *empirical*, whether a particular kind of household can be called a *family*, whether someone can be said to have an *interest* in a particular state of affairs, and so on (Williams 1976: 99, 109, 143; 1983: 115, 131, 171). In each case he classifies the dispute as one about the "sense" of the term involved. Again, however, it seems essential to the success of the social argument underlying such linguistic debates that the appraisive words in question should be offered in virtue of their accepted meanings as an apt way of describing situations which have not hitherto been described in such terms.

It is true that, as a consequence of such arguments, new meanings are often generated. But the process by which this happens is the opposite of the one Williams describes. When an argument of this nature is successful, the outcome will hardly be the emergence of new meanings, save that the application of a term with a new range of reference may eventually put pressure on the criteria for applying it. The outcome will rather be the acceptance of new social perceptions, as a result of which the relevant appraisive terms will then be applied with unchanged meanings to new circumstances. It is only when such arguments fail that new meanings tend to arise.

This contention can readily be supported if we consider some of the ways in which a failure in this type of argument is capable of leaving its traces on the language. It may be that, when a social group seeks to insist that the ordinary criteria for applying a particular appraisive term are present in a wider range of circumstances than has commonly been allowed, the other users of the language – not sharing the underlying social perceptions of the first group – may simply assume in good faith that a "new meaning" has indeed been "offered," and may then accept it. The history of our culture (and in consequence our language) has been punctuated with many such misunderstandings. One fruitful source has been the continuing efforts of the proponents of commercial society to legitimate their undertakings by reference to the most highly approved moral and spiritual values. Consider, for example, the special use of the term *religious* that first emerged in the later sixteenth century as a way of commending punctual, strict, and conscientious forms of behaviour.¹⁸ The aim was clearly to suggest that the ordinary criteria for applying the strongly commendatory term *religious* could be found in such actions, and thus that the actions themselves should be seen

¹⁸ Here I offer what I take to be a corrected account of an example I originally mentioned in an earlier article (Skinner 1974a, at pp. 298–9).

essentially as acts of piety and not merely as instances of administrative competence. The failure of this move was quickly reflected in the emergence of a new meaning for the term *religious* in the course of the seventeenth century – the meaning we still invoke when we say things like “I attend the meetings of my department religiously.” It seems clear that the need for this new lexical entry originally arose out of the incapacity of most language users to see that the ordinary criteria for *religious* (including the notion of piety) were in fact present in all the circumstances in which the term was by then beginning to be used.

There are many recent instances of the same phenomenon, some of which are cited in *Keywords*. For example, many industrial firms like to claim – with reference to their own business strategies – that they have a certain *philosophy*; and firms regularly promise to send their *literature* (meaning only their advertising brochures) to prospective customers. Again a crude attempt is clearly being made to link the activities of commercial society with a range of “higher” values. And again the failure of such efforts often gives rise to genuine polysemy. Hearing that a firm has a certain philosophy, most language users have assumed that a new meaning must be involved, and have gone on to use the term accordingly; they have not in general come to feel that corporations can indeed be said to have philosophies in the traditional sense of the term.

The language also supplies us with evidence of such ideological failures in a second and more decisive way. After a period of confusion about the criteria for applying a disputed term, the final outcome may be not polysemy, but rather a reversion to the employment of the original criteria, together with a corresponding obsolescence of the newer usages. This can be observed, for example, in the history of the word *patriot*. During the eighteenth century, the enemies of the ruling oligarchy in England sought to legitimate their attacks on the government by insisting that they were motivated entirely by their reverence for the constitution, and thus that their actions deserved to be commended as patriotic rather than condemned as factious. This at first bred such extreme uncertainty that the word *patriot* eventually came to *mean* (according to one of Dr. Johnson's definitions) “a factious disturber of the government.” With the gradual acceptance of party politics, however, this condemnatory usage gradually atrophied, and the word reverted to its original meaning and its standard application as a term of praise.¹¹

¹¹ For a fuller discussion of this example, see my article (Skinner 1974b).

Finally, the same form of argument can also have a more equivocal outcome, one which the language will again disclose. It may be that, after a similar period of semantic confusion, the original rather than the newer usage becomes obsolete. At first sight this may seem to indicate a success in the underlying campaign to change people's social perceptions. For this certainly makes it harder to invoke the primitive meaning of the word in order to insist that its new applications may be nothing more than a deformation of its basic sense. But in fact such changes again tend to be indexes of ideological failure. For the standardization of a new set of criteria will inevitably carry with it an alteration of the term's appraisive force. Sometimes the power of the word to evaluate what it is used to describe may be retained in a different (and usually weaker) form, as in the well known case of the word *naughty*. But often the process of acquiring a new meaning goes with a total loss of appraisive force. A good example is provided by the history of the word *commodity*. Before the advent of commercial society, to speak of something as a commodity was to praise it, and in particular to affirm that it answered to one's desires, and could thus be seen as beneficial, convenient, a source of advantage. Later an attempt was made to suggest that an article produced for sale ought to be seen as a source of benefit or advantage to its purchaser, and ought in consequence to be described and commended as a commodity. For a time the outcome of this further effort by the earliest English capitalists to legitimate their activities was that *commodity* became a polysemic word. But eventually the original applications withered away, leaving us with nothing more than the current and purely descriptive meaning of *commodity* as an object of trade. Although the capitalists inherited the earth, and with it much of the English language, they were unable in this case to persuade their fellow language users to endorse their attempted eulogy of their own commercial practices.

VI

Even if we agree about the criteria for applying an appraisive term, and also agree that a given set of circumstances can properly be said to answer to those criteria, I have suggested that still a third type of dispute can arise: a dispute about the direction of the term's evaluative force – a dispute, that is, about the nature and range of the speech acts it can be used to perform. Once again this can certainly be characterized as a substantive social dispute and not merely a linguistic one. For in this case what is at issue is the possibility that a

group of language users may be open to the charge of having a mistaken or an undesirable social attitude.

We can distinguish two main routes by which an argument of this kind will be likely to issue in a contentious use of evaluative language. First, we may dissent from an orthodox social attitude by employing an appraisive term in such a way that its standard speech-act potential is weakened or even abolished. This can in turn be achieved in one of two ways. If we do not share the accepted evaluation of some particular action or state of affairs, we may indicate our dissent simply by dropping the corresponding term from our vocabulary altogether. There are many instances of this move in current social debate. Among terms which have hitherto been used to commend what they describe, this seems to be happening in the case of *gentleman*. Among terms previously used to express an element of condescension or patronage, this already seems to have happened with *native*, at least when used as a noun.

The other method of registering the same form of protest is more challenging. While continuing to employ an accepted term of social description and appraisal, we may make it contextually clear that we are using it merely to describe, and not at the same time to evaluate what is thereby described. Again, there are many contemporary instances of this move. Among terms previously used to evince condescension or even hatred, the classic example is provided by the word *black* (used as the description of a person), whether employed as an adjective or a noun. Among terms previously used to commend, we may note the new and carefully neutral applications of such words as *culture* and *civilization*. As Williams himself observes, these latter usages appear to have originated within the discipline of social anthropology, but have now come to be very generally accepted by those who wish to disavow any suggestion that one particular civilization may be more deserving of study than another (1976: 50, 80; 1983: 59, 91).

The other main way in which we can use our evaluative language to signal our social attitudes is more dramatic in its implications. It is possible to indicate, simply through our use of appraisive terms, not that we dissent from the idea of evaluating what they describe, but rather that we disagree with the direction of the evaluation and wish to see it reversed.

Again there are obviously two possibilities here. We may use a term normally employed to condemn what it describes in such a way as to make it contextually clear that, in our view, the relevant action or state of affairs ought in fact to be commended. As Williams points

out, one interesting example of this reversal can be seen in the history of the word *myth* (1976:176–8; 1983: 210–12). In a more confidently rationalist age, to describe an explanation as mythological was to dismiss it. But in recent discussions the term has often been used to extol the mythological “version of reality” as “truer” and “deeper” than more mundane accounts. Conversely, we may dislike a form of behavior now regarded as praiseworthy, and indicate our disapproval by making it contextually clear that, although the term we are using is standardly employed to commend, we are employing it to condemn what is being described. Once again, there are many instances of this kind of struggle in current ideological debates. One only has to think of those politicians who are regularly praised by one group of commentators as *liberal* while others employ the same term in order to denounce them.

Williams surveys a large number of disagreements that fall within this third general category, and in many cases his comments on them are extremely interesting and shrewd. But his discussion suffers throughout from a failure to distinguish this type of argument from the first type we considered, in which the primary point at issue was the proper sense or meaning of the terms involved. Indeed Williams not only fails but refuses to distinguish between these two types of argument. For example, he insists that the change involved in the move from condemning myths to commending them must be construed as a change in the “sense” of the word *myth* (Williams 1976: 177; 1983: 211).

It would be perfectly possible, however, for both the sense and the reference of *myth* to remain stable in the face of the sort of changes in the use of the word that Williams is concerned to point out. It may be that all (and only) those theories and explanations which used to be called mythological are still called mythological, and that the *only* change involved in the use of the term derives from the shift from condemning myths to commending them. It is true that such a variation of speech-act potential will be very likely in due course to affect the sense (and in consequence the reference) of the word. But it is a mistake to suppose that this type of argument is primarily (or even necessarily) concerned with sense. What is changing – at least initially – is nothing to do with sense; what is changing is simply a social or intellectual attitude on the part of those who use the language.¹²

¹² In this paragraph I draw on Searle (1962). However, Searle does not, I think, succeed in showing that meaning and speech acts are wholly separate. All he shows is that sense and reference are capable of remaining stable while speech-act potential is undergoing a change. Depending on one's view of meaning, one might still want to insist that speech-act potential is a part of meaning, even if it is distinct from both sense and reference.

VII

I have now tried to furnish at least a preliminary response to the very large question I raised at the outset. I asked what kinds of knowledge and awareness we can hope to acquire about our social world through studying the vocabulary we use to describe and appraise it. I have answered that there are three main types of insight we can hope to gain: insights into changing social beliefs and theories; into changing social perceptions and awareness; and into changing social values and attitudes. I have thus attempted to supply at least a sketch of what seems to me most seriously lacking in Williams's book: an account of the sort of methodology we need to develop in order to use the evidence of our social vocabulary as a clue to the improved understanding of our social world.

This in turn suggests a further and even more vertiginous question: are we now in a position to say anything about the nature of the role played by our appraisive vocabulary in the process (and hence in the explanation) of social change?

Williams clearly thinks that we are, and conveys this sense by alluding repeatedly to the image of language as a mirror of social reality. The process of social change is treated as the primary cause of developments in our vocabulary; conversely, such developments are treated as reflections of the process of social change.¹³ Describing the emergence of capitalism as "a distinct economic system," for example, Williams remarks that this gave rise to "interesting consequent uses of language."¹⁴ And in commenting more specifically on "the economic changes of the Industrial Revolution," he notes that these produced a "greatly sharpened" and extended "vocabulary of class" (Williams 1976: 53; 1983: 62).

There is no doubt that this image serves to remind us of an important point. Where we encounter a wide measure of agreement about the application of key social terms, we must be dealing with a strikingly homogeneous social and moral world; where there is no such agreement, we can expect chaos. But it is arguable that the metaphor is also misleading in one crucial respect. It encourages us to assume that we are dealing with two distinct and contingently related domains: that of the social world itself, and that of the language we then apply in an attempt to delineate its character. This certainly seems to be the assumption underlying Williams's account.

¹³ Note, however, that Williams (1983: 22) now counters this criticism.

¹⁴ Williams (1976: 43). But in Williams (1983) this claim is deleted.

He sees a complete disjunction between "the words" he discusses and "the real issues" in the social world. And he sometimes speaks as if the gap between the two is one we can barely hope to bridge. "However complete the analysis" we offer at the linguistic level, he maintains, we cannot expect that "the real issues" will be fundamentally affected.¹⁴

To speak in this way is to forget something that Williams emphasizes at other points in *Keywords* with striking force: the fact that one of the most important uses of evaluative language is that of legitimating as well as describing the activities and attitudes of dominant social groups. The significance of this consideration can be brought out if we revert for a moment to an example already cited – the entrepreneurs of Elizabethan England who were anxious to persuade their contemporaries that, although their commercial enterprises might appear to be morally doubtful, they were in fact deserving of respect. One device they adopted was to argue, as we have seen, that their characteristically punctual and conscientious behavior could properly be seen as religious in character, and hence as motivated by pious and not merely self-seeking principles. Their underlying purpose was of course to legitimate their apparently untoward behavior by insisting on the propriety of describing it in these highly commendatory terms.

Now it may seem – and this is evidently Williams's view – that this sort of example precisely fits the metaphor of language as a mirror of a more basic reality. The merchant is perceived to be engaged in a more or less dubious way of life which he has a strong motive for wishing to exhibit as legitimate. So he professes just those principles, and offers just those descriptions, that serve to present what he is doing in a morally acceptable light. Since the selection of the principles and their accompanying descriptions both relate to his behavior in an obviously *ex post facto* way, it hardly seems that an explanation of his behavior need depend in the least on studying the moral language he may elect to use. For his choice of vocabulary appears to be entirely determined by his prior social needs.

As I have tried to hint, however, this is to misunderstand the role of the normative vocabulary which any society employs for the description and appraisal of its social life. The merchant cannot hope to describe *any* action he may choose to perform as being "religious" in character, but only those which can be claimed with some show of plausibility to meet such agreed criteria as there may be for the application of the term. It follows that if he is anxious to

¹⁴ Williams (1976: 13–14). But in Williams (1983: 16) this claim is modified.

have his conduct appraised as that of a genuinely religious man, he will find himself restricted to the performance of only a certain range of actions. Thus the problem facing the merchant who wishes to be seen as pious rather than self-interested cannot simply be the instrumental one of tailoring his account of his principles in order to fit his projects; it must in part be the problem of tailoring his projects in order to make them answer to the pre-existing language of moral principles.¹⁶

The story of the merchant suggests two morals. One is that it must be a mistake to portray the relationship between our social vocabulary and our social world as a purely external and contingent one. It is true that our social practices help to bestow meaning on our social vocabulary. But it is equally true that our social vocabulary helps to constitute the character of those practices. To see the role of our evaluative language in helping to legitimate social action is to see the point at which our social vocabulary and our social fabric mutually prop each other up. As Charles Taylor (1971: 24) has remarked, "we can speak of mutual dependence if we like, but what this really points up is the artificiality of the distinction between social reality and the language of description of that social reality."

The other moral is that, if there are indeed causal linkages between social language and social reality, to speak of the one as mirroring the other may be to envisage the causal arrows pointing in the wrong direction. As the example of the Elizabethan merchant suggests, to recover the nature of the normative vocabulary available to an agent for the description and appraisal of his conduct is at the same time to indicate one of the constraints on his conduct itself. This in turn suggests that, if we wish to explain why our merchant chose to concentrate on certain courses of action while avoiding others, we are bound to make some reference to the prevailing moral language of the society in which he was acting. For this, it now appears, must have figured not as an epiphenomenon of his projects, but as one of the determinants of his actions.

To conclude with these morals is to issue a warning to literary critics and social historians alike to avoid a prevalent but impoverishing form of reductionism. But it is also to suggest that the special techniques of the literary critic have – or ought to have – a central place in the business of cultural criticism which a book like Williams's *Keywords* has scarcely begun to recognize.

¹⁶ Here I draw heavily on the preface to my book (Skinner 1978).

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