



Review of Karl Britton, *Communication*

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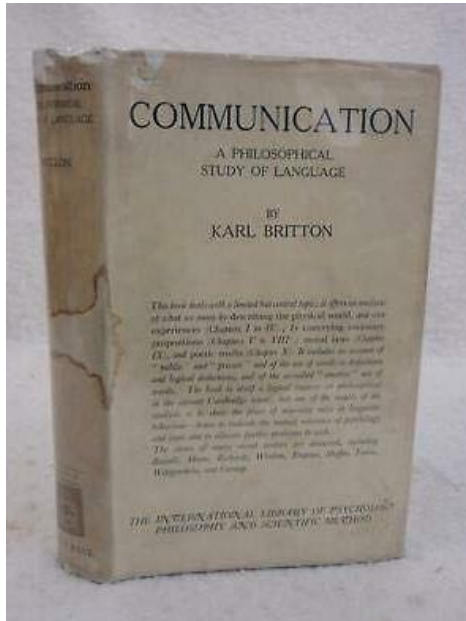
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Review of Karl Britton, *Communication*

Review of Karl Britton, *Communication: A Philosophical Study of Language* (London/New York, 1939: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner/Harcourt, Brace), *Mind* 48 no. 192 (October 1939), 518–27



THIS BOOK deals with a subject far wider than its title would suggest. Mr Britton dismisses the epistemological and psychological issues specifically connected with verbal communication after a comparatively brief discussion, and devotes the rest of his treatise to the larger and more familiar question of what the various logically distinguishable types of intelligible expression in fact assert or describe. In the course of this he deals with various senses of the term ‘meaning’, with the distinction between contingent and necessary propositions, and with the function of certain among the constituents of descriptive sentences, such as the signs for

particulars and universals: he illustrates in some detail the conception of the 'analysis' of propositions and its various 'levels' as advanced by Professor L. S. Stebbing and Mr J. T. Wisdom, considers the relation of a priori to empirical elements in the statements of the natural sciences, and ends with an examination of normative and poetical language, which is influenced predominantly by the psychological theories of the technique and effects of certain modes of expression advanced in Messrs Richards and Empson.

Mr Britton's method of approach derives directly from what are now the classical texts of logical positivism, the writings of Russell and Wittgenstein, Carnap and Neurath: and consequently the fundamental principle on which his entire discussion rests is the well-known doctrine according to which all significant assertions either refer (directly or indirectly) to sensible and introspectable experiences, or else provide information not about the world but about the means used to describe it – about ways in which symbols are or ought to be used. In so far as verbal expressions cannot be shown, however remotely and implicitly, to perform either of these two functions, they are, e.g. in many propositions of ethics and politics, poetry or rhetoric, being used emotively or dynamically, not to describe facts, but as, for instance, in oaths or commands, to express or relieve the speaker's emotional state or to stimulate emotion or behaviour in others: sentences used in this fashion, while they may convey or indicate states of mind or of feeling, say nothing which is true or false, since they do not assert anything at all.

This is a view with which Mr Britton's potential reader – if not the plain man, at any rate the plain philosopher – must by now be more than familiar: and to expound it once again cannot have been the author's principal aim in publishing this book. It is his attempt to demonstrate its truth in detail, by considering what in fact happens when we declare that we understand the language of poets, philosophers and ordinary men, that constitutes his claim on our attention.

In the course of this attempt Mr Britton raises several issues of the first importance, and raises them in a definite, sharp and relevant form: but having stated them he for [519] the most part deals with them sketchily and perfunctorily. The premisses on which the solutions rest are, as often as not, assumed without argument, or, if argued, are seldom treated with sufficient thoroughness: the old, stock criticisms are either wholly ignored or else are declared to be in principle answerable, and with this swiftly dismissed; the discussion, after a promising and even exciting beginning, usually stops short at precisely the point at which the issue at last begins to grow crucial, with the result that although all that Mr Britton says is sensible and coherent, and much of it is both well informed and interesting, the argument is by turns inconclusive and dogmatic, either skirting what it ought to examine or assuming what it ought to prove. Since, moreover, it is written in semi-technical language, and is therefore designed for a specialist audience, some of the space taken up in elucidating elementary concepts of modern logic might well have been devoted to those more controversial present-day issues with which Mr Britton, who is almost too devoted a follower of his teachers, is clearly well qualified to deal. Nor is his prose made more readable by his unbridled use of italics, brackets, inverted commas, etc., which disperse instead of concentrating attention: on the other hand, it should in fairness be added that the analytical table, the index and the network of cross references are a model of their kind.

Mr Britton's book is thus unlikely to convince the unconverted: while those who share the author's outlook, after starting full of hope in such intelligent company, are likely to all the more deeply disappointed by his failure to provide illumination on precisely those problems which, whether they turn out to be genuine or counterfeit, at present constitute a source of great and increasing perplexity. To illustrate this I shall attempt to comment briefly on some of Mr Britton's main theses in the order in which he presents them.

From the beginning the reader is struck by a certain looseness of formulation, unexpected in so tough-minded an author: thus,

on p. 4, in defining communication, Mr Britton says that when as a result of B's words certain expectations about the future (or attention to the possibility of a certain occurrence) is caused in A, which is identical with or similar to that which B was using his words to describe, then B may be said to have communicated something to A. Communication lends its title to this book, and it is plainly important to describe it as accurately as possible.

If communication presupposes understanding, the above seems far too wide. Let us suppose that B uses words of a language with which A is not acquainted, and they happen by some odd causal process, say a conditioned reflex, to set off a train of thought in A similar to that normally denoted in B's language by B's words, then we should not normally say that A had understood B's words, although he might behave as if he had, as if the communication were successful; we should not say that A had understood B unless he believed that the sounds emitted by B were words, i.e. sounds of a kind normally [520] intended to record thoughts or feelings. If we do not add this to our account, we should have to say that in a world whose inhabitants are (a) unaware of each other's existence, and (b) are in the habit of talking to themselves in wholly dissimilar languages, the utterance of words by A, provided that, when they impinge on the consciousness of B (who treats them as so many meaningless sounds in nature), they cause thoughts similar to those symbolised by A's words, constitutes a case of communication between A and B. And this is not what we normally mean.

It may, of course, be quite true that, as Mr Britton observes, for certain scientific purposes where maximum verifiability is desirable, it may be necessary to confine the meanings of words to whatever is denotable in strictly behaviourist reports, so that 'uttering' and 'writing' are substituted for thinking or expecting; but as he himself later rejects physicalism for importing this discipline into regions where it leads to absurd results, he cannot consistently defend the purely causal analysis of communication cited above.

Mr Britton's account of communication is not in fact seriously affected by this: I have quoted it solely as an example of his general

tendency to use behaviourist language, which, whatever may have been its therapeutic value in the past, nowadays throws more darkness than light on the meanings of words. Similar phrases occur later: e.g. on p. 13, where the meaning of a sign is said to be the effect which it has ‘according to a more or less definite convention’. One cannot say of effects that they occur or do not occur according to conventions: the adoption of a convention may, by standardising the use of words, turn their de facto effects into officially recognised, de jure, references, and so increase the potency of the effect of the utterance of the words themselves; but, as it stands, the phrase seems to conceal a confusion of rules of language and natural laws, and is to that extent misleading.

These, however, are comparatively trifling points. Let us go on to Mr Britton’s treatment of problems which he rightly regards as fundamental in his discussion. On p. 19 he says, ‘A proposition cannot rationally gain [...] assent unless it is verifiable, consistent, and consistent with all other propositions that are believed to have as great a probability.’ If propositions are not being used to mean the same as sentences (and in the next sentence a distinction is in fact drawn between them), it is difficult to see how a proposition – i.e. what a sentence means – could be inconsistent. The discussion of the three senses of meaning, instructive and valuable though it is in itself, throws no clear light on this: not even upon the crucial question whether non-symbolic thought is a contradiction in terms. It is mentioned, indeed, but only to be abandoned: and the only passage which describes thought or understanding describes it obscurely as a bodily orientation towards a ‘possibility’, a suspicious term whose close association with such harmful fictions as ‘subsistent entities’ and ‘unactualised facts’ renders it a certain source of confusion unless it is carefully qualified.

What, however, Mr [521] Britton would call the ‘key word’ here is clearly ‘verifiable’. On this subject he naturally has a good deal to say. He begins by stressing that familiar distinction between verifiability in principle and in practice, and goes on to report that some difficulty has been encountered in explaining how certain

types of proposition are verifiable, viz. those concerning (1) infinite properties (e.g. infinite virtue), (2) physical objects, (3) other selves, (4) events in the past. The first are vaguely defined and wisely neglected. The last seem slightly to puzzle Mr Britton, who appears to hold that because all verification entails expectation, what is to be verified necessarily refers to the future. However, as he himself elsewhere agrees that the fact that I was not born at an earlier date is purely empirical, and my inability personally to verify Caesar's passage of the Rubicon is due, among other things, to the date of my birth, which (logically) might have occurred at any time, he implicitly disposes of the apparent difficulty and with it the whole pseudo-problem of the alleged primacy of the future tense. But, what is far more unaccountable, Mr Britton says not a word about the notorious difficulties connected with the verification of general and, in particular, causal propositions (not to speak of unfulfilled hypotheticals and the like), which led Ramsey into embracing his well-known paradoxes. If a theory of verifiability is a *sine qua non* of any account of communication, the case of general propositions cannot be omitted without leaving the whole issue suspended in the air. However, Mr Britton bravely addresses himself to his remaining two classes, and states his views on these in some detail. These must now be briefly considered.

1. Physical Object Statements. Mr Britton is obliged by his positivist tenets to adopt a wholehearted phenomenalism. In expounding Mr J. T. Wisdom's notion of philosophical analysis, which he accepts, he explains that a material object statement like 'There will be a full moon tonight' must be analysed into statements of the form 'I shall observe a bright circle high up' etc., which refer exclusively to sensible experience.

Now it is widely known that phenomenalism in its complete, full-blooded form has at present reached a total, though it is to be hoped only temporary, impasse. The programme and principles of phenomenalism have been clear since Berkeley's day: physical object propositions (*analysanda*) were to be translated into directly experiential propositions (analyses), which they entailed and were entailed by. What was not so clear was how this 'reduction' was to

be achieved. It was soon seen (*a*) that the experiential propositions occurring in the analysis might include general propositions, the method of whose verification was obscure. This did not, perhaps, constitute a difficulty for phenomenalism so much as for the general theory of verifiability.

Nevertheless, it was awkward (*b*) that the group of experiential propositions entailed by a given physical object proposition might not be enumerable, because it was either infinite or indefinite. From this it followed that no precisely specifiable group of experiential propositions could be said collectively to entail a physical object proposition, although it was still held that one could point to individual experiential propositions as being entailed by this or that physical object statement.

But even this proved a vain delusion. For it was presently realised that (*c*) it was not easy to produce bona fide specimens even of such one-way entailments. For if 'The moon will be full tonight' entails 'I shall see a bright circle' etc., then if the latter is falsified, the former too is refuted. But I may not see a bright circle if a cloud intervenes, or if I choose not to look up, or if I am struck with blindness, etc. etc., which is, plainly, quite compatible with the truth of the statement about the moon. Nor could I in principle enumerate a finite set of conditions in which alone the statement about the moon shall be held to entail the statement about the circle: for I may even then see no circle, yet it might still be the case that on that night the moon is full, although, for some undiscovered cause, invisible to me; at any rate to say so is not self-contradictory.

It has been suggested that when conditions *abcd* occur, and yet I see no silver disc, it is irrational for me to assert that the moon is full. But to say that it is irrational is not to say that it is a contradiction in terms: the term 'irrational' was used precisely in order to avoid the implication of self-contradiction; if it is logically possible to assert the irrational, its contradictory is not entailed; and yet entailment between the propositions in at least one direction is what a consistent phenomenalism seems to require.

This crux may, of course, turn out to be yet another pseudo-problem, but it has not been unravelled yet: and it is, therefore, wholly illegitimate for anyone at present to assume the truth and applicability of the methods of phenomenalism without providing at least a tentative solution of the difficulty. But Mr Britton seems unaware that anything is amiss: he discusses at some length the question whether a physical object is a logical construction into which the experiences of others enter – decides that they do, provided they are normal – and defines normality, not altogether plausibly, in terms of standards common to the majority of men. But the general validity of phenomenalist analyses – whether they can, in principle, be performed at all – is not examined but taken for granted.

Thus Mr Britton, boldly identifying evidence for with at any rate one of the meanings of a proposition, declares (p. 132) that the physical object proposition ('The moon is full' etc.) implies the experiential proposition ('a bright circle' etc.) because (p. 52) one is part of the meaning of the other, albeit implicitly. Elsewhere (p. 73) he declares that the connection is syntactical, as all genuine implication is so by definition: later (p. 133) he declares that the propositions required for an exhaustive translation of a physical object proposition are 'indefinite'. Does this mean a disjunction of groups of propositions, such that any one group provides a correct analysis, but the number of groups is infinite? If so, there is a con[523]fusion with the analysis of propositions of a different, namely 'England made war on France', type, where the analyses ('A body of Englishmen landed in France', etc., or 'A bombardment took place in which English aeroplanes' etc.) all equally entail the *analysandum*, but not vice versa: which is exactly what the 'bright circle' proposition fails to do.

'It is surely logically possible', says Mr Britton on p. 134, 'that a vocabulary should be adopted or adapted by means of which the whole content of type 1 [physical object] sentences could be re-expressed', and on the next page 'It may very well be, as Mr Wisdom hazards, that the *piecemeal* correlation of *some* type 3 [experiential] sentences with their proper type 1 [physical object]

sentences is all we shall achieve [owing to the excessive rapidity of the perceptual process and the feebleness of our introspective powers]. And it may very well be all that we shall ever need to attempt.' But these are only pious hopes, which, if the difficulties are as fatal as they seem, are doomed to disappointment. The burden of my complaint is not that Mr Britton should entertain them, but that, since he builds so largely upon them, he should appear so little aware of how precarious they have lately grown.

(2) On his problem (3) – the verification of the mental or emotional states of others – Mr Britton is more definite. Any theory of communication clearly must attach some sense to the statement that others, beside myself, have experiences. Mr Britton, after paying due tribute to their merits, rejects both 'methodological solipsism' and its antidote, 'physicalism', the first because it entails an unpalatable asymmetry in the analyses of the terms 'mine' and 'yours', the second because it can give no adequate account of propositions describing direct acquaintance.

What, Mr Britton inquires, can be meant by saying that I cannot verify your experience? How is 'cannot' being used? If I mean that I cannot verify it in principle, I must mean that to say that I do so is self-contradictory; this can be so only because I define all that I can verify as 'mine', in which case 'I can verify only my own, never your, experience' is a trivial tautology. If, on the other hand, I mean only that I cannot verify it in practice, this must be due to a causal obstacle: your experience is causally connected with your body, mine with my body; but it is logically conceivable, however unlikely, that one day a perception of a blue patch, or the feeling of headache, should occur as part of my experiential series (i.e. that normally correlated with a certain body A) which is directly caused by the behaviour of (your) body B, normally correlated with another (your) experiential series. I could then be said to have intercepted one of your experiences. The sense in which this 'cannot' happen is purely causal. If 'cannot' bears neither of these two senses, it cannot mean anything at all; the problem is thus a verbal one, and has been 'dissolved'.

But this overlooks two essential considerations which I shall put as briefly as I can. The first is this: [524] ‘mine’ and ‘yours’ cannot be defined solely in terms of a correlation with different bodily systems, since that would imply that if in a single ‘stream of experience’ some items were causally traceable to body A, others to body B, that would correspond to the difference of meaning between ‘my’ and ‘your’ experience. But this is precisely the unplausible solipsism rejected by Mr Britton: physics, indeed, could be quite consistently reformulated in terms of it; but it is not what we normally mean.

Some other sense must therefore be found for the sentence ‘There are experiences other than mine (or this)’. Although not syntactically vicious, i.e. self-contradictory, no definite meaning can be attached to this phrase unless some acts of ostensive definition are performed; and this can plainly not be done with regard to the words ‘not this’ or ‘not mine’, whose referents cannot in any sense be ‘pointed to’. Yet some non-solipstistic meaning must be given to the expression if we are to be allowed to ask the further question, ‘What evidence have we for supposing that body B has experiences analogous to body A?’ Given that the first sentence makes sense, the second can be answered by the ordinary methods of induction and analogy, for which Mr Britton’s imaginary contingency would supply a particularly powerful piece of imaginary evidence. For this, however, the basic statement affirming the existence of more than one stream of experience, which can be conclusively verified by no empirical method, must first be acknowledged to be significant: and if this is incompatible with the strict verification principle, so much the worse for the principle.

The second point is closely connected with the first. If I say ‘My headache is more violent than X’s’ I do not mean – what I should have to mean if Mr Britton were right – ‘My pain is more violent than a pain I should have had if instead of being causally affected by (my) body A, I were affected by (X’s) body B’, though that is perhaps implied by what I say: for that relegates X’s sensations to the logical status of a ‘hypothetical datum’, the back of the chair

which I cannot, but might be, observing, which does not exist in the sense in which actual data exist, but it is part of the chair which 'exists' in another sense; whereas I wish to say that X's headache exists in the same sense as my own. Two headaches exist, are occurring, in the same sense of 'two' and of 'occurring' as that in which two blue circular patches may both occur in a single sense field. And that this is so seems to me to be in principle equally unverifiable by X and by me. If I understand him rightly, Mr Britton asserts the contradictory of this. But I may have misunderstood him. If so I hope he will forgive me.

All empirical sentences are, according to Mr Britton, reducible to ones whose subjects are 'loci' or 'propertied time-places', or gaps for these. The sense field is thus conceived as a kind of permanent blackboard whose surface is occupied by qualities and relations. 'This patch is green' is thus a synthetic proposition [525] equivalent to 'This (ideally pointable to) portion of my sense field is green' (whereas it might logically be red or blue, or, I suppose, not have existed at all if I were unconscious. This has been so vehemently denied by those who hold that, since 'this' refers to 'this green' or 'this round', such propositions are tautologies, that it is a pity that Mr Britton does not discuss the matter further.

Does he think that one can say 'This twinge of pain might have been a tickling sensation', where 'this' refers to an identifiable 'locus' in a somatic field which is the common 'substratum' of both characteristics? It is not clear whether the ultimate subjects are 'loci', or 'occurrents' which are said to occupy 'loci'. An occurrent is described as 'the fact that a quality occurs': if this is not equivalent to a 'locus', can unoccupied 'loci' be subjects of attributes? Facts are referred to variously as 'essentially abstract but *there*', 'abstract aspects of fully concrete events', 'objects of discriminating awareness – that to which we make a learned and discriminating response', 'that which determines assent or dissent'. While one may be able to grasp the general drift of these remarks, they are very far from clear. Is it self-evident, for example, that belief is a species of assent, an introspectable psychological act? As for the description of facts in terms of assent, 'Leave this room!'

would be said to determine assent or dissent – but is it a statement of fact? Mr Britton is very elliptical on all this.

Having dealt with contingent propositions, Mr Britton addresses himself to necessary ones, and to the structure and ingredients of propositional language in general. These are his best chapters. It is true that, following his habit, he again withholds from us what we should most like to know: e.g. his analysis of so-called synthetic a priori propositions. His general position should preclude him from recognising such entities, but he declines to commit himself. He explains the function of definitions and of the tautologies which follow from them, describes and illustrates Sheffer's method of 'postulation analyses', and suggests that all a priori propositions can be dealt with by this means. If they are genuinely a priori they follow from verbal definitions, i.e. are always tautologies, often implicit and needing analysis to trace them to their source and reveal their true logical character. This applies to all save 'synthetic a priori propositions',¹ concerning which Mr Britton volunteers nothing. He distinguishes 'necessary' from 'a priori', and regards the former as indicating that a usage, of language or behaviour, is insisted upon in a given society – a dynamic word conveying a command to obey a rule. By taking 'White swans are white' as his specimen a priori sentence he ensures the plausibility of his thesis: it would have been more useful if a logical or mathematical example had been chosen.

The remarks on logical syntax are original and interesting, in particular the arguments urged against Carnap's identification of it with epistemology. The syntax of colour words is touched on, as when Mr Britton says that 'Red [526] is incompatible with green' is a rule of syntax. On the other hand, he elsewhere asks whether it is contingent that 'This is red' can never mean 'This is red (1) and also red (2)' where (1) and (2) denote different shades of red. The relation of ostensive definitions to syntactical rules is left

¹ [Here the published text is corrupt, reading, nonsensically, "synthetic" necessary propositions a priori'. The wording adopted above is that in the manuscript at MS. Berlin 423, fol. 83.]

unexplained, so that we are left to ask whether the ostensive definition of, say, 'red' and 'green' can be fixed, while at the same time the syntactical rules governing their use may be varied: if this is not permitted the reason for this is obviously of primary importance. Similarly, after briefly wondering why 'While I may see that X is red, I cannot similarly *see* that X is not red', and so whetting the reader's appetite. Mr Britton immediately abandons the issue and moves on to something else.

There follows a chapter on logical structure which leaves us once more frustrated. It is in spite of that the best section of the book: the sense in which definitions in the sciences are 'based' on empirical generalisations, the process by which the latter are transformed into the former, is excellently described and illustrated. What we are denied is Mr Britton's view of what constitutes 'logical form'. One of the most dramatic assertions in the *Tractatus* was that according to which the structure of facts was shown forth, 'pictured', not stated, by the order of elements in the proposition: it was implied that relations between 'elements' of facts could in principle be conveyed only by a relation between symbols, not by symbols for relations, at any rate in a 'logically perfect' language. This always seemed a very peculiar kind of a priori proposition: and although Mr Britton points out that any order whatever between symbols, spatial or temporal, can be constituted the conventional means of symbolising the 'structure' of facts, must it necessarily be an *order* of symbols? Does Mr Britton accept the notion of a logically perfect language? In the case of inflected languages like Latin or Russian, neither the temporal nor the spatial order of symbols makes any radical difference to the sense: are they therefore less 'logically perfect' than English or French?

On p. 202 we find a list of tentative demands to be satisfied by any informative language: it must exclude contradictions, have rules to distinguish absolute subjects from predicates, and must consist of structured signs, i.e. 'signs which consist of facts about the combination of elements' (this is distinctly obscure: is it an expansion of 'showing forth?'); are these desiderata grammatical,

logical, or psychological? Mr Britton confines himself to the last aspect only; but if they are purely psychological, such an expression as 'structure of fact', which he distinguishes from 'structure of language', since it is full of ontological associations, is very misleading. Mr Britton evades the issue by saying that he has no views concerning any metaphysical implications which his formulation may or may not have.

The two last chapters deal with ethical propositions and poetical speech. In the first the view is developed that ethical (and indeed [527] all normative) propositions are partly emotive or dynamic, partly descriptive of means thought likely to promote certain interests of individuals or classes or whole societies. This in itself plausible doctrine is, unfortunately, connected with a rigidly utilitarian analysis of the factual content of ethical proposition, which gives less than their due to other forms of naturalism; nor is the anthropological background provided wholly convincing.

The section on poetry contains an interesting discussion of the sense in which poetry is 'true to life', and concludes that what is meant is that it affects the emotions in a manner less or more conducive to the true interests of the speaker, or the group to which he belongs, or the whole of humanity. Nothing, however, is said of the view of those who maintain that a poem may be intended primarily neither as propaganda, nor to give pleasure, but to communicate a view of natural or mental or emotional states, which, because the poet feels not merely more intensely, but often observes more minutely, sharply and completely, may make the responsive reader aware of new configurations in his own experience or in that of others – literally convey new facts which the vocabulary of ordinary speech may not be capable of representing so vividly and simply. This is surely the sense which many of those who speak of this or that work of art as true to life, at any rare sometimes, wish to express: that it records a genuine experience, whether 'real' or 'imaginary'; and causes in others an awareness of such an experience, which in certain respects resembles the experience of their ordinary life, but compared to it

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is far more accurate, vivid, detailed, connected, more ‘face to face’ with the object.

I hope that these pages of criticism will not deceive the reader into underrating Mr Britton’s book. I have tried to convey the diversity and the importance of the topics with which it deals, and the intellectual honesty and alertness which are brought to the discussion of them. Perhaps only a man of genius could give convincing answers to all the questions which are here so sharply formulated: to have raised them afresh is in itself no inconsiderable merit.

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