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Language, Self & World

The Interplay of Abstract & Concrete

Senior Thesis

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. . . consider how much time must have been spent and how much knowledge needed to find out numbers, abstract terms, aorists and all the tenses of verbs, particles, syntax, the method of connecting propositions, the forms of reasoning and all the logic of speech.

--Rousseau,
On the Origin of Inequality.

. . . he finds the being of the people to which he belongs an already established, firm world--objectively present to him--with which he has to incorporate himself.

--Hegel,
The Philosophy of History.

Every one of our thoughts and actions is given its shape--made possible, in fact--by a subconscious framework of perceptual and logical categorizations forming what we tend to call "reality" and common sense. Some study of anthropology and linguistics, however, reveals our world-view to be a function not of objective reality or human commonality but of the subtle and variable influences of culture.

Probably the single most important of these influences is language which, as Ernst Cassirer noted, creates our conception of reality rather than imitating reality itself. As a medium of expression it does not usually receive the focus of attention; yet it has the power to shape thoughts themselves which it is commonly supposed merely to express. Its significance, therefore, lies in its subtlety as well as its power.

This notion touches on the long-standing debate whether language precedes thought or vice-versa. This study will not attempt to uphold either argument, but will proceed on the assumption