On Pinning Down a Wor(l)d

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Who controls the meaning of language? And what limits can we set on children's linguistic upbringing? In their searching analysis of the use of language in *Dogtooth*, Stefan Ramaekers and Naomi Hodgson raise important questions about the relationship between language-learning and world-constitution. They conclude with the keen observation that *Dogtooth* "may show an extreme allegorization" of "normal" upbringing, "but for this reason it is also uncannily revealing."[1] Indeed, the film presents a world so absurdly contrived, yet eerily comprehensible, that it functions, prism-like, as a window onto countless aspects of our own world. In the great tradition of philosophical allegories and thought-experiments that take the everyday to the extreme, *Dogtooth* is a fertile exercise in imagining the potential – and the horror – within more quotidian situations.

Ramaekers and Hodgson argue that one of the things revealed to us by *Dogtooth* is the parents' stake in "pinning down" a world for their children. Language is the primary means through which world meanings are transmitted between generations. Cavell "emphasizes that the child must at some point *want* to take over what we are initiating her into," which points to a surprising vulnerability on the part of the parents.[2] In *Dogtooth*, this dynamic is rendered unmistakable by the parents' use of false vocabulary to keep their children prisoners within their family. Ramaekers and Hodgson claim that, despite her best efforts, "the educator does not have under control what the world means;" the versatility and generativity of language will ultimately erode the power of the language-teacher to fix a world for her charges.[3]

The reading of *Dogtooth* presented here launches us head-first

into thorny questions of epistemology and philosophy of language. In the rest of this response I will sketch out a few possible implications and risks of this reading, especially in our so-called "post-truth" society.

Following Cavell and Wittgenstein, Ramaekers and Hodgson see language meaning as embedded within the mutual comprehension of language users, and as "forms of life" that exceed fixed concepts. For this reason, language-learning is more than initiation into semantic rules; it is initiation into the particular ontological vernacular of one's family or community, or what Wittgenstein called "language games." The parents in *Dogtooth* are similar to all parents in their use of language to construct a world for their children. They differ from other parents, however, in their esoteric definitions of words and their rigid control over the children's exposure to alternate meanings. Consequently, the children are initiated into a world without any sense of its contingency. As the authors say, "By pinning down language, the parents are seen to block out what Cavell terms 'the fierce ambiguity of ordinary language.'"[4] I take Ramaekers and Hodgson to be implying that all parents, to a modest extent, manipulate the world in order to mitigate their own vulnerability. We are typically uncomfortable with ambiguity, especially insofar as it reveals the tenuousness of parental authority.

Cavell's insistence on the ambiguity of ordinary language helps explain what is wrong, in part, with the parents' attempt to cut off their children from other forms of life. It is fallacious to believe, and dangerous to pretend, that one set of definitions can serve a human life in all its complexity. For Cavell: "On the basis of our early encounters with words, we go on in our further experiences to (learn to) 'project' those words into new contexts."[5] Yet this insight may be less useful in diagnosing what, if anything, is wrong with the words that the parents use within the closed circuit of their family conventions. If the children are

successfully prevented from "projecting" their words into new contexts, what can we say about the definitions they have been given?

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein says: "the use of [a] word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands."[6] If we take this "everybody" literally, however, the very flexibility of language is undercut; if no one could legitimately use a word in a way that some language users do not (initially) understand, language would indeed be fixed. What size community is necessary to confer a suitable justification on the use of a word? At what point do the conventions that legitimate linguistic usage become so eccentric that they constitute a "private language"?

In Cavell's neo-Wittgensteinian approach to language initiation, it seems all but impossible to assess whether things have been given correct names. We can easily say that the definitions given in *Dogtooth* are false from the perspective of our own linguistic conventions. We cannot, however, locate an objective standpoint from which we are able to say what is wrong with the parents' practices within the closed hermeneutic economy of their family. It is only Christina's importation of outside meanings that exposes the parents' language regime as incomplete. If the children were as thoroughly sheltered as the parents intended, the contingency of their world would not matter to them.

This leaves us in a confused position as spectators. Ramaekers and Hodgson note: "The misinformation is obvious. … But for the children, no such misinformation is taking place. For them, importantly, the words *cannot* mean just anything else."[7] I am interested in the use of "misinformation" here, as well as what the authors mean when they assert that "[t]he parents give the children a 'false' account of the world."[8] The question of epistemic authority is invoked and yet simultaneously diffused by such appraisals. While Ramaekers and Hodgson point out that

"it is not necessarily, or always, clear who can claim authority for saying … this or that projection of a word into a new context … is correct,"[9] we seem to be doing just that when we deny that a "zombie" is a "little yellow flower."[10] So can we say that the parents' definitions are "false"? Or only that they "are far removed from these words' ordinary use"?[11]

I am concerned about the implications of an overly flexible stance on these issues, especially in the present climate. Whereas the authors see *Dogtooth* as an allegory for a parenting culture that is too averse to risk, I propose to interpret it as a perhaps more foreboding allegory for the disavowal of verifiable knowledge and objective meaning. The parents are playing not "language games" but "propaganda games" with their children. Their motivation is perhaps, as suggested in the essay, to shelter themselves from the eventual loss of parental control, but the method is nonetheless deceitful. Political leaders, likewise, deliberately obfuscate truth, abuse linguistic meanings, and create a state of confusion and dependency in order to consolidate their own power. Rather than concluding that we are all embroiled in deceptions and ambiguities of this type, it seems politically urgent to assert that some words constitute the *real* world, and some words constitute only the projection of the puppeteers in Plato's cave.

If *Dogtooth* is intended to hold up a mirror to our non-fictitious lives, I want to entertain the thought that aspects of our present world are as dystopic as the thought-experiments philosophers and artists have conjured. When sizable portions of the population accept "fake news" as reality and are easily duped by "alternative facts," there is something much more sinister than innocuous ambiguity taking place. We must be able to critique meaning more robustly than merely by gesturing at convention, even (or especially) when those conventions go viral. Some definitions are not legitimate projections of linguistic meaning into other

contexts, but rather a private language popularized for the benefit of those in power.

The implications for education (and upbringing) are extreme. Ramaekers and Hodgson's observation about parental control indeed assumes even greater importance as we contemplate the ways that parents may themselves be deceived by larger webs of linguistic power, and inured to the healthy ambiguity of normal language. Consider the two million American children who are homeschooled, a large number of them by religious fundamentalist parents who deny evolution and climate change. To become complacent about Cavell's "identity of language and human life" is to risk sacrificing the verifiable world for whatever world children happen to be initiated into.[12]

Do all parents filter the world for their children, transmitting an onto-linguistic universe that they hope will be carried on? Certainly. Are all parents explicitly manipulative, or themselves deceived by other forces? No – and if we define linguistic truth only as the world-constituting meanings that are understood between particular parents and children, or a state and its citizens, we will have done a grave disservice to both education and democracy.

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1 Stefan Ramaekers and Naomi Hodgson, this volume.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Robert Mankin, "An Introduction to *The Claim of Reason*," *Salmagundi* 67 (1985): 66-89, 75.

6 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th Ed., eds. and trans. P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 261.

7 Ramaekers and Hodgson, this volume.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid. Wittgenstein may consider these diagnoses equivalent, on the grounds that a usage that is too far removed from convention will fail the test of "family resemblance."

12 Mankin, "An Introduction," 76.