

Coercive Theories of Meaning

From Hobbes and Hume through to Wittgenstein and Dummett it has been a common tactic in the empiricist and analytic traditions to erect a theory or criterion of meaningfulness with a view to proving that the people you don't like talk nonsense. I contend that this is a disreputable practice which smacks of totalitarianism and suggest an argument which, I venture to hope, will subvert such vulgar systems of philosophy. The hero of my story is Hume's opponent and Burke's victim, Dr Richard Price. When we run over our libraries persuaded of these principles what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of philosophy, for instance; let us ask, *Does it purport to prove that we have no idea corresponding to some word that we commonly employ?* Perhaps yes. *Does it argue, for instance that the correct method in philosophy is to demonstrate to someone who wanted to say something metaphysical that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions?* Perhaps yes. *Does it suggest, for instance that the idea of an unverifiable truth is UNINTELLIGIBLE?* Commit it then to the flames: For in so far as relies on such arguments, it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.