

The Tyranny of Language

The existence of language seems little short of a miracle. The essential uninventability of language by the individual mind is strikingly at odds with the fact that each person understands it, uses it, indeed is immersed in it. Language enables the subjective to be articulated, to be presented as objective: it is irreducible and at the same time impossible to transcend. Nevertheless, the claim that nothing truly exists beyond language is a kind of tyranny. In recent philosophy this tyranny has taken two forms. The first is the English conceit of linguistic philosophy, the second is French postmodernism—the one, the tyranny of the tongue, the other, the tyranny of the text. (Of course, given the invention of printing, the second trumps the first.) The fact that one is dominated by the precision of language, its beauty and subtlety—that one has no choice but to use it—does not mean that there is nothing beyond it. Yet it is also true that the effort to overcome the fugitive nature of thinking inevitably leads to its expression in a graphical form of language,, whether it's writing, painting, or composition.