Thought, Language and Perception - Members' Weekend 2014

Abstract

Traditional philosophical accounts of thought, and the concepts of which they are composed, place the cognitive barrier so high that only language-using creatures are capable of thinking. If we wish to attribute thought to prelinguistic children and animals, we have to maintain that some perceptual experience has significance which is not dependent on concepts and language. Conceptualist John McDowell denies this possibility, holding that all perceptual experience is conceptual and that thought only develops with language-acquisition. I explain why McDowell is wrong, then offer a couple of suggestions.

1) Background: the relation of thought and language

'Language first' school: Ayer, Ryle, Sellars (who taught Quine), Dummett, John McDowell,

> [O]ur attainment of the capacity to grasp and entertain thoughts…runs in parallel with our attainment of the ability to express those thoughts in language: it is *by* learning to express and communicate them that we come to apprehend the thoughts we so express.' (Michael Dummett, *Thought & Reality*, p. 20.)

'Thought first' school: Gottlob Frege, Russell at one point, Gareth Evans,David Wiggins, perhaps Jerry Fodor.

> A theory of linguistic meaning may legitimately *presuppose* a grasp, on the part of the speakers of the language, of the thoughts and concepts expressible in it, and, as an assumption of the theory, a philosophical understanding of what it is to grasp those thoughts and concepts. (*Ibid*: 20-21.)

2) The problem with *thought*

Thoughts require such a high-level of cognitive & reasoning skills that only language-possessors are capable of having them.

Thoughts are *structured*: that is, they have components, usually regarded as *concepts*.

Frege *1. John is happy.* (In symbols, *Fa*)

The **thought** of a complete atomic sentence is its *sense* or meaning ('proposition' expressed by it). The sentence has 2 components, the subject, 'John', and the predicate, 'is happy'. When we put the two components together we get a 'complete thought'. The *same* thought could be expressed by *'Jean est content' or 'Hans ist glücklich'.*

A **concept** is a technical term: the referent of a *predicate.* It may be of an **object,** if we have a *noun* in predicate position:

2. This is a table

or a concept may be of a **property**, if we have an *adjective* in predicate position:

3. *The table is square*

Fregean thoughts, senses, concepts are *shareable* not *private*.

Gareth Evans

Thoughts are structured because they are a complex of distinct conceptual *abilities.* Concept possession requires the capacity to form appropriate thoughts, both **recognitional** & **inferential,** about objects and properties**.**

> 'Thus someone who thinks that John is happy and Harry is happy exercises on two occasions the conceptual ability which we call "possessing the concept of happiness". And similarly someone who thinks that John is happy and that John is sad exercises on two occasions a single ability, the ability to think of, or think about, John.' (*The Varieties of Reference*: 101)

'Generality Constraint': one can *generalise* a concept from a known context to an unknown one, *in the absence of the object or entity the concept is of*.

Evans: if one has the capacity to single out a particular object in thought, one thereby has the *concept* of that particular object.

'**Russell's Principle'**: *sufficient* discriminatory knowledge to say that one is thinking about *John* and not *Harry.*

The problem summarised

1. Thoughts are structured.
2. The components of thoughts are concepts.
3. Concepts are subject to the Generality Constraint.
4. (**from 3**) Therefore concepts require language.
5. (**from 2 & 4)** Therefore thought requires language.
6. Animals and infants have no language.
7. (**from 4 & 6)** Animals and infants have no concepts.
8. (**from 5 & 6**) Animals and infants cannot think.

Procedure: Accept Generality Constraint. See how thought evolves from primitive pro-thoughts of non-linguistic creatures.

3) Thought and Perception

Does *all* perceptual experience have to be *conceptual*?

Anti-conceptualists (Evans, Peacocke): human adults share some non-conceptual perceptual content with infants and animals.

José-Luis Bermúdez: thinking-*how* is perceptual & aims to solve problems; thinking-*that* is propositional & requires language.

4) McDowell's conceptualism: *All* perceptual experience is conceptual.

Stems from an attempt to solve what he *sees as* a fundamental flaw in empiricism.

Empiricism: our knowledge of the external world is acquired via the senses. Empirical knowledge has 2 distinct components:

1. The 'given', raw data, which can be phenomenal ['qualia', 'perceptual experience'] or observational [raw scientific data]. These provide the content to our basic beliefs about how the world is.
2. The interpretation, or 'conceptual scheme', that is, the analytic, a priori truths of logic employed by the mind to process the raw data.

The 'given' & its interpretation work together to produce empirical *knowledge* – inferential *beliefs* dependent on matters of *fact*.

Problem (a/c Sellar/McDowell): we end up with 2 allegedly distinct and incompatible areas of discourse:

1. The 'logical space of nature', where the natural sciences function. Descriptive empirical statements are in this category.
2. What Sellars and McDowell (following Kant) call the 'logical space of reasons'. This is the framework within which our conceptual thinking - our 'world-directed *beliefs'*- operate.

Naturalistic fallacy: the move from a descriptive statement to a normative one. *Knowledge* is a normative concept a/c Sellars/McDowell. A belief has to comply with the norms of truth and justification if it is to count as knowledge. The empirical statement 'this table is brown' - is not *normative.* It cannot ground a *belief* within the space of reasons *that the table is brown*. But this is what empiricism tries to do. Sense data, aka perceptual experiences, belong *in the space of nature*, are deemed to ground our world-directed beliefs, which belong in the *space of reasons.*

McDowell's solution: move perceptual experience into the logical space of reasons: *all* perceptual experience is conceptual. Thought and perceptual experience are mutually dependent. 'Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions (i.e. perceptual experiences) without concepts are blind'. We perceive a world which impinges on us not as 'raw data' but as already conceptualised. But what does McDowell actually *mean* by 'conceptual'?

> 'It is essential to conceptual capacities…that they can be employed in *active thinking, thinking that is open to reflection about its own rational credentials*. When I say that the content of experience is conceptual, this is what I mean by conceptual'. (*M&W*: 47)

Infants & animals: 'Mere animals' are limited to coping with the pressures of their environment. We may allow them a 'proto-subjective perceptual sensitivity to features of their environment' but this need not amount to an 'awareness of the outer world'. Moreover 'feelings of pain or fear need not amount to an awareness of an inner world'. Human infants are born mere animals; they are transformed into thinkers and intentional agents in the course of coming to maturity by being initiated into a language. Language enables an individual human being to emancipate herself from the 'merely animal mode of living' and emerge into the 'freedom' of rationality. (*M&W*: 125)

5) Why we should reject McDowell's conceptualism

- Logical space of reasons is regarded as *sui generis* & not open to dispute, implying that there is something 'non-natural' about human rational thought; makes it a mystery how conceptual thought and language could have got off the ground.
- If we see the domain of nature & domain of rationality as occupying the *same* logical space, the 'naturalistic fallacy' disappears. Perception and reason are both part of the domain of nature. I know the table is there because I can see it, touch it, etc.. The *truthmaker* of my belief that the table is there is *the table itself*. The world itself, via our (perceptual & causal) interaction with it, shapes our thoughts about it. Our thoughts ultimately shape our language and our logic.

6) The way forward?

To bridge gap btwn thinking *how* & thinking *that,* we need an account of 'proto-conceptual' non-linguistic thinking.

Recognitional capacities: widespread in the animal kingdom, *in the presence of* the object recognised - usually offspring or mother. Postulate a spectrum of recognitional capacities: from this very fundamental biological level to fully-fledged singular thought and the ability to make an identity judgment.

Inferential judgments: usually regarded as *linguistic*. But see David Wiggins & Fei Xu on how we arrive at identity judgments:

> …… [W]e get these identities from our practical involvement in the singling out, the identification and the reidentification of the continuants that we refer to; …we learn how objects of this or that particular kind look, how they come into being, go out of being, move, change, develop, interact with one another, interact with other kinds of thing and interact with creatures like us. It is only by the workings of the capacities we derive from *this* involvement that we learn to think speculatively about the life histories of things not tracked continuously. (Wiggins, 2005: 443)

> ----------[U]pon seeing a member of a kind now (e.g. a cup) and a member of a different kind (e.g. a dog) at a later time, we infer there are two numerically distinct entities... Certain property changes signal a change in identity only within certain kinds of objects. For example, if you see a small chair in the comer now and a big chair there later, you infer that there are two numerically distinct chairs. But if you see a small plant in the comer now and a larger one there a few months later, it is not necessarily the case that there are two distinct plants. (Fei Xu, 1997: 370)