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

Thought and language are inextricably linked, but there's a divide between philosophers as to *how* they are related. One side holds that it is only *via the* acquisition of language that creatures can think at all. The other side holds that thought precedes language (or that language use *presupposes* thought).

Michael Dummett sums it up thus:

'Language first' school:

> [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.'

> (*Thought & Reality*, p. 20.)

'Thought first' school:

> 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.)

Among the adherents of the '**language first**' school are philosophers such as Ayer, Ryle, Sellars (who taught Quine), Dummett himself, and, in our own day, John McDowell, whom we come to shortly. McDowell is *not* a philosopher of language; indeed, he regards himself as a philosopher of thought. But he shares Dummett's view that thought *only* develops with the acquisition of language.

The **'thought first'** school includes Gottlob Frege, the founder of modern logic, Russell at one point, Gareth Evans (an important contemporary of McDowell's who died tragically young in 1980 and whom I'll discuss shortly), David Wiggins, perhaps Jerry Fodor. It also includes those *philosophers of language* who work on theories of reference, from Kaplan, Kripke, Salmon and Soames onwards. The 'thought first' school are realists Their interest lies in exploring how we use language to refer to, and express our thoughts about, an external world which is knowable and taken for granted. As you might expect, my

sympathies lie with the 'thought first' school, but there are problems with their account of thought which we come to now.

2) The problem with *thought*

In a nutshell, *thoughts*, and the *concepts* of which they are composed, require such a high-level of cognitive and reasoning skills that only language-possessing creatures are capable of having them. Many of us will be worried by this. So let's look at the traditional philosophical conception of thought and concepts and see why this is so.

It is generally agreed that thoughts are *structured*: that is, they have components, usually regarded as *concepts*.

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

Frege

On the Fregean model, the *thought* of a complete atomic sentence, like sentence 1, is its *sense* or meaning (what we usually call the 'proposition' expressed by it). The sentence has just two components, the subject, 'John', and the predicate, 'is happy'. It is only when we put the two components together that we get a 'complete thought'. The *same* thought or proposition could be expressed by the atomic sentences *'Jean est content' or 'Hans ist glücklich'.*

For Frege, a *concept* is a technical term: in his logical system, a concept is the referent of a *predicate.* So a concept may be of an **object,** if we have a *noun* in predicate position:

      1. *This is a <u>table</u>*

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

      2. *The table is <u>square</u>*

Frege's view has the advantage that the senses of concepts are abstract *public* entities, not internal private ones. Concepts are thus in principle *shareable* by anyone with a sufficient grasp of language. This view of concepts is not held by everyone. For some philosophers, they are internal mental entities (I think Fodor is one of those). But concepts still feature as components of thoughts.

Evans

For **Gareth Evans**, who follows the Fregean line with regard to the structure and public nature of language, having a thought does not necessarily involve the apprehending and manipulation of *symbols,* at least not at the conscious level. Thoughts are structured because they are a complex of distinct conceptual *abilities.* Concept possession requires the capacity to form appropriate thoughts, both *recognitional* and *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)

Evans calls this the '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*. So I can

talk about Marianne with a third party, as I did a couple of weeks ago, and discuss whether *she* might be approached to give a talk.

Evans, like Russell before him, is interested in *singular thought:* that is, the conditions under which one can single out an object in thought prior to applying a linguistic term to it and prior to making a judgment or an inference about it. So Evans is interested in more fundamental philosophical issues than is Frege. If one has the capacity to single out a particular object in thought, according to Evans, one thereby has the concept of that particular object. For Russell, the capacity to single out an object in thought requires being able to distinguish that object from all others; Evans calls this 'Russell's Principle'. As interpreted by Evans, Russell's principle doesn't mean that one needs to know everything about an object there is to know (so he doesn't become the sceptic that Russell became). It does mean that one needs *sufficient* discriminatory knowledge to say that one is thinking about *John* and not *Harry.*

Acceptance of Russell's principle and the Generality Constraint as a precondition of concept possession seems to require a very high level of perceptual and cognitive skills *and* the use of language. This will preclude animals and infants from possessing concepts and hence from being able to think. We get an argument which looks something like this:

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.

Most of would want to resist this view. Pre-linguistic infants and clever animals (apes, dolphins, crows) clearly seem capable of thought. Babies communicate. Infants from a young age have expectations about the behaviour of moving objects, expressing surprise if for example one solid object appears to pass through another one. And we're all familiar with the well-documented problem-solving capabilities of apes and crows.

So what do we do?

I don't want to reject premises 1-4 because that would mean rejecting the Generality Constraint. The kinds of rational discourse that human beings engage in *some* of the time require it. So we need to explain how the higher-level conceptual thinking of the kind that philosophers and others indulge in, and which *does* require language, develops from the more primitive kinds of non-linguistic thinking that we want to attribute to animals and infants.

This is where the relation between *thought* and *perception* comes in. Those who deny thought to animals and pre-linguistic infants readily accept that they *perceive* their environment. So the next question is whether *all* perceptual experience has to be conceptual. The point at issue is whether there is non-conceptual perception 'with content', that is, of significance, without that significance being provided by concepts or language. Not surprisingly, philosophers are sharply divided. The anti-conceptualists (including Gareth

Evans and Christopher Peacocke) argue that *not* all perceptual experience is conceptual; human adults share some non-conceptual perceptual content with infants and animals. Only in this way can we give a naturalistic account of how thought evolved and how children learn to think. Evans, for example, talks about an 'information system', shared with animals, which is more primitive, does not satisfy the Generality Constraint, but provides a bridge towards fully-fledged singular thought. José-Luis Bermúdez, who unusually combines philosophy and empirical research (*Thinking without Words*, 2003/7), points out a distinction between two *kinds* of thought: thinking-*how* and thinking-*that.* Thinking-how is perceptual and involves practical problem-solving of the kind that a toddler does when she tries to fit pieces of a toy together, or the kind that a chimpanzee engages in when it works out how to get at a bunch of bananas hung out of reach. Thinking-that is propositional thinking and requires language. Language users like ourselves employ both types of thinking for different purposes.

The conceptualist camp resists such views, insisting that *all* thought must be of the higher-level conceptual kind which requires language, even though this means we cannot attribute thought to babies and animals. The key player here is John McDowell (*Mind and World, 1994*). We need to get an idea of what is wrong with his very influential account before we can consider the possibility of non-linguistic thought.

3) McDowell's conceptualism: the problem with empiricism

McDowell's conceptualism arises from an attempt to solve what he sees as a fundamental flaw in empiricism. Very roughly, empiricism is the view, stemming from Locke and Hume, that our knowledge of the external world is acquired via the senses. Empirical knowledge is seen as having two distinct components:

1. The 'given', raw data, which can be phenomenal ['qualia', 'perceptual experience'] or observational [raw scientific data]. These data 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' and its interpretation work together to produce empirical *knowledge* – inferential *beliefs* dependent on matters of *fact*.

The problem with this picture is that we end up with two allegedly quite distinct and incompatible areas of discourse. The first is what McDowell, following Wilfrid Sellars, dubs 'the logical space of nature', where the natural sciences function. Descriptive empirical statements are in this category. The second category is 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. The problem arises when one tries to make an inference from a statement in the logical space of nature to a belief in the logical space of reasons. One risks committing what Sellars calls a 'naturalistic fallacy'. This is the illegitimate move from a factual statement to a normative one. It is a familiar problem in ethics (recall Hume saying that we can't move from an 'is' to an 'ought'). *Knowledge* is a normative concept according to 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*, yet are deemed to ground our 'world-directed beliefs', which belong in the *space of reasons.*

McDowell's solution is to move perceptual experience from the logical space of nature into the logical space of reasons and integrate it completely: *all* perceptual experience becomes conceptual. Thought and perceptual experience are mutually dependent, hence the Kantian slogan: 'Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions (i.e. perceptual experiences) without concepts are blind'. We are embedded in and perceive a world which impinges on us not as 'raw data' but as already conceptualised. This may seem like a very attractive move, until we see what McDowell actually *means* 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)

So how do infants and animals come into this picture? 'Mere animals', says McDowell, 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)

4) Why we should reject McDowell's conceptualism

The Sellars-McDowell attack on the Myth of the Given is motivated by their commitment to the view that the natural and the rational occupy mutually exclusive logical spaces which are different in *kind*. The logical space of reasons is regarded as *sui generis* and not open to dispute. This implies that there is something 'non-natural' about human rational thought, and makes it a mystery how conceptual thought and language could have got off the ground in the first place.

However, if we see the domain of nature and the domain of rationality as occupying the *same* logical space, the alleged 'naturalistic fallacy' disappears. Perceptual experience and rational thinking are both part of the domain of nature. I know the table is there because I can see it, touch it, bump into it, scratch my name on it. The justification or rather, the *truthmaker* of my belief that the table is there is *the table itself*. So while McDowell is right to see us as embedded in the world, it is the world itself, via our interaction with it, including our perceptual experiences of it, which shapes our thoughts about it. And our thoughts ultimately shape our language and our logic.

5) The way forward?

As noted above, Bermúdez distinguishes between thinking-*how*, which is perceptual and non-linguistic, from thinking-*that,* which is propositional, conforms to the Generality Constraint and requires mastery of language. This is a useful distinction but it seems inadequate. To bridge this gap we need an account of 'proto-conceptual' thinking for non-

language or pre-language users. I think this can be done, but, given time constraints, can only hint at how.

Recall Evans' claim that concept possession requires the capacity to form appropriate thoughts about objects or properties, both recognitional & inferential. Most would accept that *recognitional* capacities in the presence of the object recognised - usually offspring or mother - are widespread in the animal kingdom. It is plausible to suppose that there is a spectrum of recognitional capacities: from this very fundamental biological level to fully-fledged singular thought and the ability to make an identity judgment. But most philosophers would hold that *inference* is a purely linguistic matter. After all, it is the key tool of philosophical argument. But I suggest that inference too is based on our perception of how the world works. As my parting shot, here is David Wiggins on how we acquire the concept of identity - not via language but by engagement in the world. We gradually become aware that objects come in distinct kinds with distinct identity, persistence and existence conditions. This grounds our inferences concerning the identity and counterfactual existence conditions of individuals:

> … [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)

And here is cognitive psychologist Fei Xu:

[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)

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