**Lecture 3: An Ancient Orthodoxy in the Philosophy of Language**

**1. Two Aspects of a Traditional View**

In the last lecture we saw two ways of formulating what seems to be the same fundamental view in the philosophy of language:

(I) Language has the same form as the world (so the world has a counterpart to syntactic structure);

(II) Basic sentences can be immediately and decisively justified by the world (their grounds are simply given by the world).

In this lecture I’m going to give a fuller characterization of this philosophy of language, and show that it reaches back into the early history of philosophy. I’m then going to object to it that it leads to an uncomfortable idealism (so it’s not surprising that that’s where McDowell ends up).

**2. The Link Between the Two Formulations**

The immediate justification of basic sentences referred to in (II) appears in a certain interpretation of the kind of statement of truth-condition which we looked at last time:

(RS) The sentence ‘Lewes is hilly’ is true if and only if Lewes is hilly.

On the relevant interpretation, the right-hand side of (RS) can in principle be simply *given* by the world itself.

We can see the connection between (I) and (II) by considering counterparts to (RS) for subsentential expressions. So we might offer this rule for using the name ‘Lewes’:

(RL) Something is correctly called ‘Lewes’ if and only if it is Lewes.

And we might offer this rule for using the adjective ‘hilly’:

(RH) Something is correctly called ‘hilly’ if and only if it is hilly.

If these are to be true counterparts to (RS), on the intended interpretation of (RS), then something’s *being* *Lewes* must be capable of being in some sense *given* by the world; similarly for something’s *being hilly*.

The superficial structure of (RL) and (RH), on this interpretation of them, is the same: words are here represented as being mere labels for independently determined categorizations. All that is involved in learning a language is learning which label goes with which pre-determined category. This is a way of expressing the core point of (II) for subsentential expressions.

But in order to express this core point, we have had to suppress the syntactic differences between ‘Lewes’ and ‘hilly’. Nevertheless, there are syntactic differences, and they must be determined somewhere. There seem to be just two options:

(A) *Lewes* and *hilly* are in some sense simply *given* by the world, but in a way which is syntax-neutral; syntax is determined at some later stage (e.g., in ‘judgement’);

(B) *Lewes* and *hilly*, as they are given in the world, have some counterpart to the syntax of ‘Lewes’ and ‘hilly’.

Option (B) here is a way of spelling out formulation (I), the isomorphism formulation. And as we’ll now see, there are problems with option (A).

**3. Problems with Option (A)**

Something like option (A) seems to be involved in Russell’s ‘multiple-relation’ theory of judgement (See Whitehead and Russell, *Principia Mathematica*, 44). On this theory if Othello judges that Desdemona loves Cassio, it’s not that Othello stands in a relation to a structured proposition, *that Desdemona loves Cassio*, but that Othello stands in a complex relation to *Desdemona*, *love*, and *Cassio*. One may also trace this kind of theory back to Locke’s account of the copula as an expression of an action of the mind (Locke, *Essay*, III, viii, 1). The idea here is that it is only in judgement, or in the mind, that the elements are combined. If we interpret this in line with option (A), the suggestion would be that it is only in judgement, or in the mind, that these elements are given anything like a syntax.

Option (A) faces three serious problems. First, it is not plausible that *Lewes* and *hilly* could simply be *given* by the world in a way which mean that the words ‘Lewes’ and ‘hilly’ were simply labels for pre-determined categorizations, while still being syntax-neutral. This is perhaps part of McDowell’s point when he claims that if experience, or the world, is to play the appropriate justificatory role, it must have an appropriate form.

Secondly, even if some other faculty – judgement, for example – combines the input from the world in a way which determines the syntax of the words, it’s not plausible that this is the only place where such a combination appears. It is true, as Kant insisted, that there is a difference between judging that Lewes is hilly, and simply having the concepts *Lewes* and *hilly* floating around in the mind. But it is equally true that there is a difference between Lewes *being* hilly (rather than, in particular, Lewes *not* being hilly), on the one hand, and the simple existence in the world of *Lewes* and *hilly*, on the other. And if that combination is to be found in the world, it looks as if it cannot just be a matter of its being in language.

And thirdly, if something like judgement is to do the job which is asked of it, then similar problems will arise for the case of judgement as arise under option (B). The question is: does judgement just produce any kind of combination, or will it only produce combinations of a certain kind – one might say, the syntactically well-formed kind? If the former is true, then judgement does not suffice to determine syntax, and something else will be needed. But if the latter is true, then judgement will have to have a kind of counterpart to syntax, just as the world does on option (B).

**4. Two Versions of Option (B)**

Here was option (B):

(B) *Lewes* and *hilly*, as they are given in the world, have some counterpart to the syntax of ‘Lewes’ and ‘hilly’.

There is obviously some difficulty in making sense of this idea of a ‘counterpart to syntax’ which is somehow there in the world. We have basically two options:

(Bi) The counterpart to syntax which is found in the world is explicable in other terms, quite independent of syntax;

(Bii) The counterpart to syntax which is found in the world is an entirely *sui generis* thing, a *quasi-syntax*.

**5. The History of Option (Bi)**

Option (Bi) has a long history: it is essentially the history of the concept of substance. In Aristotle’s *Categories*, substances are first identified as subjects of predication: a kind of ontologized version of the syntactical subject. There are two kinds of predicates: the things which are said *of* things, and the things which are *in* things. The *saying of* relation is, in effect, the relation between higher-order and lower-order substances (like that between *human* and Socrates, for example). All other predicates are *in* the relevant subjects. Substances are identified in the first instance (*Categories* ch 5) as things which are neither said of a subject nor in a subject. This is a clearly syntactic criterion, as Leibniz in effect acknowledged:

But this is not enough, and such an explanation is only nominal. (*Discourse* *on Metaphysics*, 8)

The claim that the syntactic criterion is not enough is a way of expressing a commitment to option (Bi).

The ideas of predicates being *said of* substances, or being *in* them, look like gestures towards some non-syntactic characterization of the relation of predication. Aristotle’s own most worked out independent criterion seems to be in terms of existential dependence: things which are *in* a subject are said to be unable to exist separately from what they are *in* (*Categories*,1a25). This criterion is plausibly seen as that which underlies the account of substance given in the *Metaphysics*. The most basic substance (or substances) will be that (or those) whose existence does not depend on anything else.

The same criterion seems to underlie Descartes’s view that the soul is a substance, and Spinoza’s conception of substance as ‘that which is in itself and conceived through itself’ (*Ethics* 1d3) looks like a kind of rationalist version of the same thing.

Locke (*Essay*, II, xxiii, 2) seems to offer something like a natural-science version of the same broad sort of view:

[T]he supposed, but unknown support of those qualities, we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist, *sine re substante*, without something to support them, we call that support *substantia*.

Here it is assumed that all we can perceive are qualities, and the relation of predication is understood in terms of support.

Once it is accepted that all we can perceive are qualities—that is, entities which correspond to words of a particular syntactic category—the way is open for Berkeley and Hume to embrace a more abstract conception of the relation of predication. What are taken by others to be (perceivable) substances become, for Berkeley and Hume, *collections* of perceivable qualities, and predication is in effect understood in terms of set-membership. (Berkeley, *Principles*, 1; Hume, *Treatise*, I, i, 6) Although Berkeley rejects the idea of perceivable substances, and Hume abandons substance altogether, we can understand their view as just another way of pursuing option (Bi): of trying to understand syntax in other terms. (We might even understand their view as a hard-line version of what Leibniz suggests as part of an understanding of the notion of substance, when he tries to take literally the notion of ‘containment’, in order to make good the claim that the predicates which apply to a substance are *contained* in that substance: *Discourse*, 8)

**6. The Problem with Option (Bi)**

None of these attempts to develop option (Bi) works. In the first place, it is quite unclear that there is the relevant asymmetry of dependence between predicates and substances which versions of the Aristotelian account claim: it is as hard to think of a substance without qualities as to think of qualities existing independently of any substance. If we think of the Berkeley-Hume view as an account of substance, rather than a rejection of it, it seems to suggest that the dependence runs in the opposite way.

In any case, it is unclear that any such relation of dependence is going to be able to explain, rather than exploit, the syntactic asymmetries (such as they are) which are at the heart of the key notions involved here. It is striking that Leibniz’s view seems to depend on that asymmetry, as do the views of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume: all the latter take the notion of a perceivable *quality* for granted (even if, in the case of the latter two, they take perceivable qualities to be, rather than to explain, the ideas of them).

It is natural to think that the source of the problem is the fact that there is no available non-syntactic counterpart to the notion of a sentence. A sentence is naturally understood as being complete in a way that a list is not: words can be arbitrarily added to or subtracted from a list while still leaving us with a list, but they cannot be arbitrarily added to or subtracted from a sentence while still leaving us with a sentence. There is no clear non-syntactic counterpart to this notion of completeness, and none of the accounts presented in the history of the concept of substance seems close to providing one.

**7. Option (Bii): Realist and Idealist Interpretations**

I take those people who adopt option (B), and simply use notions like *object*, *quality*, and *relation*, without any attempt to explain the nature of these things independently of syntax, to be, in effect, committed to some version of option (Bii). It is natural to think that Frege adopts a version of (Bii): for him *objects* are precisely what singular terms refer to; and what he calls *concepts* are the counterparts to predicates. He claims that objects are complete or saturated in a way that concepts are not; but this seems no more than a reflection of a fact (or apparent fact) about syntax. In a rather different tradition, David Armstrong’s *states of affairs*, composed of *particulars*, *properties*, and *relations*, look like counterparts to sentences. Between these two, Wittgenstein’s view in the *Tractatus*, that the world is the totality of facts, which in turn are concatenations, linkings-together, of objects, looks like another example of the kind.These views seem to find in the world a kind of *quasi-syntax*.

They can be understood in either a *realist* or an *idealist* way. The realist interpretation takes this quasi-syntax in the world to underlie and explain syntax in language. The idealist interpretation takes syntax in language to explain this quasi-syntax in the world: on this view, the quasi-syntax is no more than a projection of syntax.

**8. The Problem with the Realist Version**

The basic problem with the realist version of (Bii) is that there is no reason to believe it. The natural realist suggestion is that we have reason to believe that the world has a quasi-syntax independently of language, because that’s the best explanation of the fact that languages have syntax. But we have no idea what it would be for something in the world to have a quasi-syntax independently of language. This means we have no idea of how this supposed quasi-syntax might explain languages having syntax. Quasi-syntax offers us no explanation at all.

**9. Conclusion**

What this means is that we can only understand the supposed quasi-syntax of the world as a projection of the syntax of language. Within the larger context of a philosophy of language which accepts (I) and (II), this forces us into an idealist view of the world. That’s a position I want to reject, for the reasons mentioned in the first lecture: the kind of dependence needed for idealism is hard to make sense of; and we seem to be committed to some form of realism in everything we do.

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