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The Social Anatomy of Inference

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The message of this shopper's guide is "Caveat Emptor." It aims to show that semantic holism is optional, expensive, and costly to maintain. I agree with these claims, and with the overall conclusion that there are "practically *no* closed options in semantics." I want to indicate how one might go about overcoming some of the difficulties they point out with individuating conceptual contents by their inferential roles.

The main issue is how to understand the identity and individuation of such generic semantic properties of thoughts or utterances as having or expressing propositional, conceptual, or intentional content. It is made more precise by these definitions:

A property is *anatomic* just in case if anything has it, then at least one other thing does...If a property is not anatomic, then...it is atomistic or punctate.¹

In a weak sense, a semantic theory is holistic if it rules out the possibility of punctate minds or languages—those having only a single belief or capable of expressing only a single proposition. But there is also a stronger, if unavoidably vaguer, sense in play:

Holistic properties are properties such that, if anything has them, then *lots* of other things must have them too...[They are] *very* anatomic.²

There are good reasons to take conceptual contentfulness to be anatomic, and so to reject the possibility of punctate minds or languages. Everything turns on how *conceptual* contentfulness is demarcated, though, and I doubt that such matters are amenable to the sort of knock-down demonstration of the incoherence of all alternatives for which Fodor and Lepore apparently yearn. Here is one way of putting the considerations I find persuasive. Every physical object reliably responds differentially to its environment. A chunk of iron rusts in water, and not in oil. Each repeatable response-type can be thought of as classifying environing situations or stimuli, accordingly as

¹ [1].

² [2].

they do or do not tend to elicit a response of that type. In this way a certain sort of content is associated with states that mediate stimulus and response: a spider classifies something (treats it in practice) *as* food by eating it. No-one not in the grip of a theory would be tempted to think that in such cases the iron or the spider are applying *concepts*—that the content their responses acquire in this way are specifically *conceptual* contents.

What more is required? A trained parrot or a photocell hooked up to suitable peripherals may produce utterances indistinguishable from a human observer's "That's red," and may be reliably differentially disposed so to respond to just the same set of stimuli as the observer. What difference makes the difference between mere responsive classification and responsive *conceptual* classification? The insight underlying conceptual role semantics is that in virtue of the role it plays in the observer's behavioral economy, the observer *understands* its response, in a way the parrot and the photocell do not. The observer's practical grasp of the concept 'red'—over and above the reliable differential responsive dispositions she shares with the parrot and the photocell—consists in her dispositions to take the application of the concept *red* as a *reason* that warrants the application of other concepts, such as *colored*, and as something that can itself be warranted by the application of further concepts, such as *scarlet*. In short, specifically *conceptual* classification is distinguished by its *inferential* articulation.

I think this is a good way to use 'conceptual', but there are others. The important thing is not the word, but picking out and understanding an important phenomenon. Taking inferential articulation to be criterial of the conceptual as such cuts at important joints. If you think there are other sorts of intentionality (sentience without concept-mongering sapience), then you can think of the explanatory target as *conceptual* intentionality or contentfulness—one species among others. If you object to calling it 'conceptual', just call it 'inferentially articulated'.

Possession of inferentially articulated content is clearly an anatomic semantic property, for serving as premise or conclusion in nontrivial inferences requires inferential relations to other contents that also play such roles. Further, nothing would count as grasping such a content unless it involved being disposed to treat some inferences involving that content as good and others as bad.³ If that is so, then there cannot be punctate concept-grasping minds or concept-expressing languages.

This is a very weak claim, and the most telling arguments Fodor and Lepore present kick in when one tries to go on with the story from here. Of the many that deserve discussion, I'll focus on two. First, it is pointed out⁴ that

³ As the authors say, it is possible to deny such a connection between how content is individuated and what one must do to count as grasping it. Filing in the sketch offered here would require justifying this move.

⁴ [166]–[172].

conceptual role theory seems to make sense only as one part of a “two-factor” theory, which includes truth and reference as a further independent semantic dimension. But then one wants to know about the relations between them, and worries about what precludes radical mismatches between the two dimensions of intension and extension, inferential role and truth conditions.

These challenges are well-taken. I think the right response is to show how the extensional dimension of semantic evaluation can be understood as an aspect of concept use—by explaining *referential* roles in terms of *inferential* roles. This is a tall order, and I can offer only a sketch here of how such a story might go: To be *propositionally* contentful is to occupy a position in the space of reasons, as what can serve both as the premise and as the conclusion of inferences. Inferential consequences are necessary conditions, and inferential antecedents are sufficient conditions; together these articulate the circumstances and consequences of application of concepts. The key to seeing why these should be understood as *truth* conditions lies in the *social* nature of the fundamental inferential practice of giving and asking for reasons, and that is a longer story. Concern with the representational dimension of concept use—distinguishing what thought and talk are about—is a feature of the essentially social practice of assessing the truth of what *others* think or say.

Think first about the role of truth assessments in attributions of *knowledge*, thought of as justified true belief. In taking you to have a belief, I attribute to you a certain kind of propositionally contentful commitment—one whose inferential articulation is manifested in the fact that by making one claim you thereby commit yourself to others, whose contents follow as inferential consequences from the one you acknowledge. In taking that belief to be justified, I attribute to you *entitlement* to that commitment—perhaps because I take it to be an inferential consequence of other commitments I take you to be entitled to. What about truth? In taking your belief or claim to be true, though, I am not *attributing* anything to you. I am rather *undertaking* a commitment myself—*endorsing* the claim that I attribute to you, taking responsibility for it myself. The game of giving and asking for reasons cannot be understood apart from this social distinction of perspective, between the attitudes each of us *attributes*, and those we *adopt*. Given such a distinction, it is possible to understand semantic assessments of truth, and the truth-talk that makes them explicit.⁵

The primary explicitly representational locution in natural languages is *de re* ascriptions of propositional attitude: John claims (or believes) *of* (or *about*) the first Postmaster General that he is the inventor of bifocals. It is their role in such ascriptions that distinguishes the intentionality-expressing sense of

⁵ I tell a fuller story corresponding to this promissory note in “Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth-Talk,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. XII: Realism; 1988, pp. 75–93.

‘of’ and ‘about’ from the rest—for instance from their use in “the pen *of* my Aunt” and “running *about* three miles”. What they express is differences of social perspective regarding inferential roles. In making an ascription such as the one above, I am doing two things: attributing one commitment to John and undertaking another one (the ascription) myself. So there is an issue as to who is taken to be responsible for using a certain expression (“the first Postmaster General”) in specifying the content of the ascribed commitment. If I attribute that responsibility, I can make that clear by ascribing *de dicto*: John believes that the First Postmaster General is the inventor of bifocals. I am claiming he would accept this way of putting things—the dictum.⁶ But I can make the *de re* ascription in the case where John accepts “Benjamin Franklin invented bifocals,” and it is *me*, not John, who endorses the substitution-inference licensing identity claim that Benjamin Franklin was the First Postmaster General. My talk of what his belief is of, about, or represents makes explicit that it is *my* commitments that are being appealed to as auxiliary hypotheses in extracting the inferential consequences (and so specifying the conceptual content) of the claim being attributed. It is along these lines that I think the referential dimension of semantic assessment—talk about what someone is talking *about*—can, like truth talk, ultimately be understood in terms of the *social* structure of the inferential articulation of claims and concepts.⁷

A second objection, more central to the book than the two-factor point, turns on a worry about how it is possible to individuate inferential roles so as to make sense of the possibility of beliefs being *shared* by people who do not share *all* their beliefs. For as Quine argued, what else one becomes committed to as a consequence of a given commitment, and what evidence would entitle one to it, depends on what other claims are available to serve as auxiliary hypotheses. If all the inferences a claim is involved in are equally constitutive of its conceptual content, then it seems any difference of belief will be a difference of content. But then it seems that people with some doxastic differences cannot communicate; there is no common stock of inferentially articulated propositional contents available to them both to agree or disagree about.⁸

⁶ Possibly translated, with any indexicals suitably adjusted for actual speaker and circumstance.

⁷ This sort of account is developed at length in Chapter Eight of my forthcoming book, *Making It Explicit*.

⁸ And as the authors point out, if the possibility of transpersonal (and, indeed, transtemporal) *identity* of content is surrendered, so is any intelligible notion of *similarity* of content. For talk of similarity must be cashed out in terms of agreeing about the propriety of *many*, though not all, of the *same* inferences and expression is involved in; but sharing even one such inferential endorsement presupposes sharing the conceptual contents it involves—just what the strong holistic view is not entitled to.

The obvious move is to privilege *some* of the inferences a concept is involved in as constitutive of its content, treating the rest as warranted by collateral information. Grasping or sharing the concept then only involves mastering these essential inferences. The trouble is that the conditionals that codify these inferential relations will have to have a special status, and the upshot of Quine's arguments against the analytic-synthetic distinction is that he could find no trace in our discursive practice of such a special status. Of course, as Fodor and Lepore indicate, the fact that such privileging candidates as unrevisability and a prioricity won't do the job is hardly decisive. Other possibilities are not far to seek. (One that has not gotten the attention it deserves is Sellars' suggestion that the practical status that privileges concept-constitutive inferences is their counterfactual robustness.⁹)

Semantic molecularism of this sort stops shy of full-blown holism at "strong anatomism": the claim not only that in order to have a propositionally contentful belief or grasp a conceptual content one must have or grasp some others inferentially related to it (which is "weak anatomism"), but that there is some one set of further beliefs or concepts one must have or grasp—a difference of quantifier scope. Weak anatomism requires that concepts be inferentially articulated, but does not take it that there is some particular set of privileged inferences that is necessary and sufficient to count as grasping it. Since it need not entail that sharing one belief requires sharing many, this sort of view is dismissed as "too weak to be worth the trouble of defending,"¹⁰ (even though it would rule out the possibility of punctate minds and languages, which they are so fond of invoking). A better reason is that giving up a single privileged set of content constitutive inferences in favor of a disjunctive conception (conceivably of disjoint sets of inferences mastery of which is sufficient for grasp of the concept) reinstates the worry about communication and the sharing of concepts. The Quinean pragmatic question then becomes urgent: Given that two interlocutors endorse different inferences, what difference in practice corresponds to the difference between their sharing a concept (but in virtue of different disjuncts), and simply having different concepts? Surely having the word or sentence in common is not sufficient.

Quine's own response to the problem of making sense of communication given a holistic theory of meaning is to move from concern with meaning to concern with reference. A Zoroastrian endorses different inferences involving tokenings of 'the sun' than I do, but we can nevertheless both be talking *about* the same things—saying *of* the sun and *of* the class of things that emit

⁹ Locus classicus is "Concepts as Involving Laws, and Inconceivable Without Them," reprinted at pp. 87–124 of J. Sicha (ed.), *Pure Pragmatics and Possible Worlds* [Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1980]. So conceived, meaning-constitutive relations are not *a priori*: we need to find out a lot about the world and its laws to know what counterfactuals to endorse.

¹⁰ [31].

light that the one is included in the other. Thus we can exchange extensional information. This move is usually made in the context of a two-factor analysis, but it makes just as much sense where assessments of truth and reference are understood as aspects of broadly inferential social functional roles.

The key to understanding the sense in which inferentially articulated concepts are shared is that such semantic assessments have a *normative* significance. What is required to see through the difficulty about sharing holistically individuated inferential commitments is a shift of perspective from a Cartesian concern with our grip on concepts to a Kantian concern with their grip on us. The conceptual content of one's beliefs and claims determines what one is *committed* to and what would *entitle* one to those commitments. Attributing use of a particular concept is taking its user to be bound by proprieties that determine what inferences involving it are *correct*. It does not require that the concept-user actually make only correct the correct inferences.

If there is no privileged subset of content-constitutive inferences, then what inferences are correct turns on which auxiliary hypotheses are *true* of the things one is talking *about*. These inferential proprieties are not determined by any individual's behavior. People who produce very different performances and exhibit very different behavioral dispositions may count as undertaking or acknowledging the very same public obligations (and, in this connection using the same words is not irrelevant, though it is not decisive either). After all, different people can undertake the same marriage or mortgage obligations by producing and being disposed to produce quite various sorts of performances.

Different interlocutors endorse different claims, that it, take-true different auxiliary hypotheses, and so may disagree about just what everyone who applies the concept *sun* commits themselves to thereby. And they can recognize that different people apply that concept differently, reason differently with it. Nonetheless, they can *all* take it that *everyone* is bound by the *same* properties, *ought* to reason the same way; for they are all talking about the same thing, and what inferences are correct is determined by the facts (=true claims) about the sun, whatever those may be. They are all beholden to the same standards. And this is to say that we can understand those who speak our language as sharing our concepts, even while understanding those concepts inferentially.