

CDD: 149.94

LANGUAGE, LOGIC, AND ONTOLOGY: RESPONSE TO OSCAR ESQUISABEL

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Abstract: Oscar Esquisabel gives an overview of Chapter 13, tracing connections with several philosophers and traditions in philosophy, especially with the hermeneutic tradition. In my response I address his concluding questions about hermeneutics, and about the relation between senses, meanings, and concepts.

Keywords: Language. Sense. Meaning. Concept. Objectivity. Hermeneutics.

LINGUAGEM, LÓGICA E ONTOLOGIA: RÉPLICA À OSCAR ESQUISABEL

Resumo: Oscar Esquisabel apresenta uma visão geral do capítulo 13, traçando conexões com vários filósofos e tradições filosóficas, especialmente com a tradição hermenêutica. Dirijo minha réplica à suas questões finais sobre hermenêutica e sobre a relação entre sentidos, significados e conceitos.

Palavras chave: Linguagem. Sentido. Significado. Conceito. Objetividade. Hermenêutica.

Oscar gives a very interesting and illuminating overview of Chapter 13, tracing connections with several philosophers and traditions in philosophy, especially with the hermeneutic tradition. In his final remarks he offers some conclusions and raises some questions. I will follow the order of his questions.

1. HERMENEUTICS AND UNDER-DETERMINATION OF MEANING

Although I am not a connoisseur of the hermeneutic tradition, I quite agree with the view Oscar attributes to me in his comparison with the hermeneutic conception (p. 408-409). I certainly do not see mathematical formalization as an inappropriate tool for understanding important aspects of language, but only, as he says, as insufficient for understanding the broader character of language as an aspect of human action and interaction.

I followed up Oscar's reference to Gadamer, and read the discussion of language in Part III of *Truth and Method*. There are, of course, similarities and dissimilarities with the views I express in Chapter 13, one of the dissimilarities being the strong emphasis on dialogue. But even though Gadamer places an emphasis on dialogue, and on "coming to an understanding", there is a passage on p. 443 where he also stresses the continuity between human language and animal communication as a natural phenomenon, which is closer to my view. He says:

Coming to an understanding as such ... does not need any tools, in the proper sense of the word. To that extent coming to an understanding through human conversation is no different from the understanding that occurs between animals.

At the end of the paper Oscar makes a connection between hermeneutics and Quine's argument of indeterminacy of translation, suggesting that the latter can be interpreted as "an epistemological argument about the under-determination of our knowledge of meaning, i.e., as an argument about the lack of certainty pertaining to any attempt to fix the meaning of linguistic expressions." As Quine has always insisted, however, the indeterminacy of translation is quite different from the under-determination of our knowledge of meaning, in that the indeterminacy of translation is

supposed to show the much stronger thesis that there are no facts of the matter in the attribution of meanings.¹

2. SENSES, CONCEPTS, AND MEANINGS

With respect to the relation between senses, concepts, and meanings, I take senses to be objective conditions of applicability, concepts to be mental conditions of applicability, and meanings to be inter-subjective conditions of use.

I take senses to be objective properties (akin to Frege's "manners of presentation") denoted by descriptive predicates of the form 'is the so-and-so', and I take meanings to be inter-subjective properties whose identity conditions are determined by community use. On p. 27 I remark on the connection between the two:

[T]he way I think of properties is as (objective) identity conditions. Meanings of words are properties in that they are identity conditions deriving from the use of these words by a community of speakers. This is Wittgenstein's idea of meaning as use: "To know [the meaning of a word] is to use it in the same way as other people do." The way a word is used by a community of speakers is a manner of presentation of the identity conditions that constitute its meaning, or meanings. Thus meanings are properties determined by senses.

The idea is simply that the ways words (phrases, sentences, etc.) are used by a community determine the identity conditions for their use, and that these objective identity conditions are their meanings.

The inter-subjectivity of meaning derives from community use, which is an objective manner of presentation; i.e., a sense. This may dissolve some of the tension Oscar senses between the two notions in his third observation. He says, in part (p. 409):

¹ See the second quotation in note 41 (p. 58) of Chapter 13.

... meaning has a social, communal, and inter-subjective character, whereas the properties on which meaning is based are entirely objective and do not depend on linguistic uses. On the other hand, insofar as known and conceptualized by us, properties would seem to depend on our ability to mean them, and for this reason, besides being objective, are inter-subjective. But since the inter-subjective domain is mediated linguistically, and meaning is established through communal use, it seems that it is not possible to effectively distinguish the social identity conditions (meanings) from the objective identity conditions (properties).

My point, however, is that the use of a word by the community is objective, in the sense that *that is how the word is used*. So, the social identity conditions are objective identity conditions, and meaning is inter-subjective only in that it depends on the various members of the community using the word as they do. I agree, of course, that this objectivity is relative to the community in question, and other communities may have different identity conditions.

Oscar argues that our grasp of the use of a word by the community is mediated by our immersion in language, and that we cannot take “a position outside language ... to communicate what a property is as objective identity conditions.” Although I agree that our grasp of the use of a word by the community is *often* mediated by our immersion in language, this is certainly not true for the original acquisition of words by children, which depends much more on ostension (and corrections) than on an immersion in language, and is also not true for later acquisition of words by ostension or by observation of ostensive use. However, this involves the distinction between concepts and meanings.

I treat concepts as subjective identity conditions. In their acquisition of language children are developing concepts and acquiring words. Thus, as I mention in note 17 (p. 49), Victor’s concept FISH included initially crab and shrimp, as well as fish, because his learning of the word ‘fish’ involved a book where many

different animals are shown together in the water. Correcting his use of 'fish' to exclude these other animals—and also introducing 'crab', 'shrimp', 'oyster', etc. ostensibly—led not only to changing his concept FISH, but to bringing his use of the word 'fish' more in agreement with community use, and thus to the initial stages of learning the meaning of the word 'fish'.

Oscar also raises a problem of objectivity in relation to my remarks about innateness. He asks (pp. 410):

How do we justify that the concepts triggered by empirical instances really make us know the objective properties of things? Perhaps those concepts are innate, but in spite of their degree of generality, it is possible that they are completely independent of the properties of objects. The fact that they allow us to know objective properties requires a justification independent of their innate character.

I do not maintain, as does Fodor, that concepts are triggered by empirical instances, but only that just as there are innate mechanisms underlying our capacity for quality discriminations, there may be mechanisms underlying our logical capacities. Whether either of them allows us to know objective properties would seem to depend on our interpretation of the notion of objectivity. I interpret the objectivity of the properties derived from our logical capacity for differentiation, numerical discrimination, negation, etc., in the same natural sense in which the properties derived from our innate capacity for shape discriminations are objective.

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