

Consciousness #15



NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE STUDY OF THE MIND

research project 2015-2017

 UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE



John
Templeton
Foundation

newdirectionsproject.com

Next term

There will be three meetings of the seminar next term: 4, 11 and 18 May

New Directions workshop, 'Non-physicalist conceptions of consciousness' 24-26 May, Trinity Hall

Seminar 15

1. Recap: the content of pictures
2. A link between thought and perception: acquaintance?
3. Demonstrative thought

1. Recap: the content of pictures

Pictures can have propositional content

On my account, this means: the picture can be associated with a proposition (or many propositions) as a model

Propositions can model what is represented by the picture



Remember content pluralism

<NAPOLEON, the relation of CROSSING, THE ALPS>

Fregean Thought: *Napoleon is crossing the Alps*

$\{w_1, w_2, w_3, \dots, w_n\}$ i.e. all those worlds in which
Napoleon is crossing the Alps

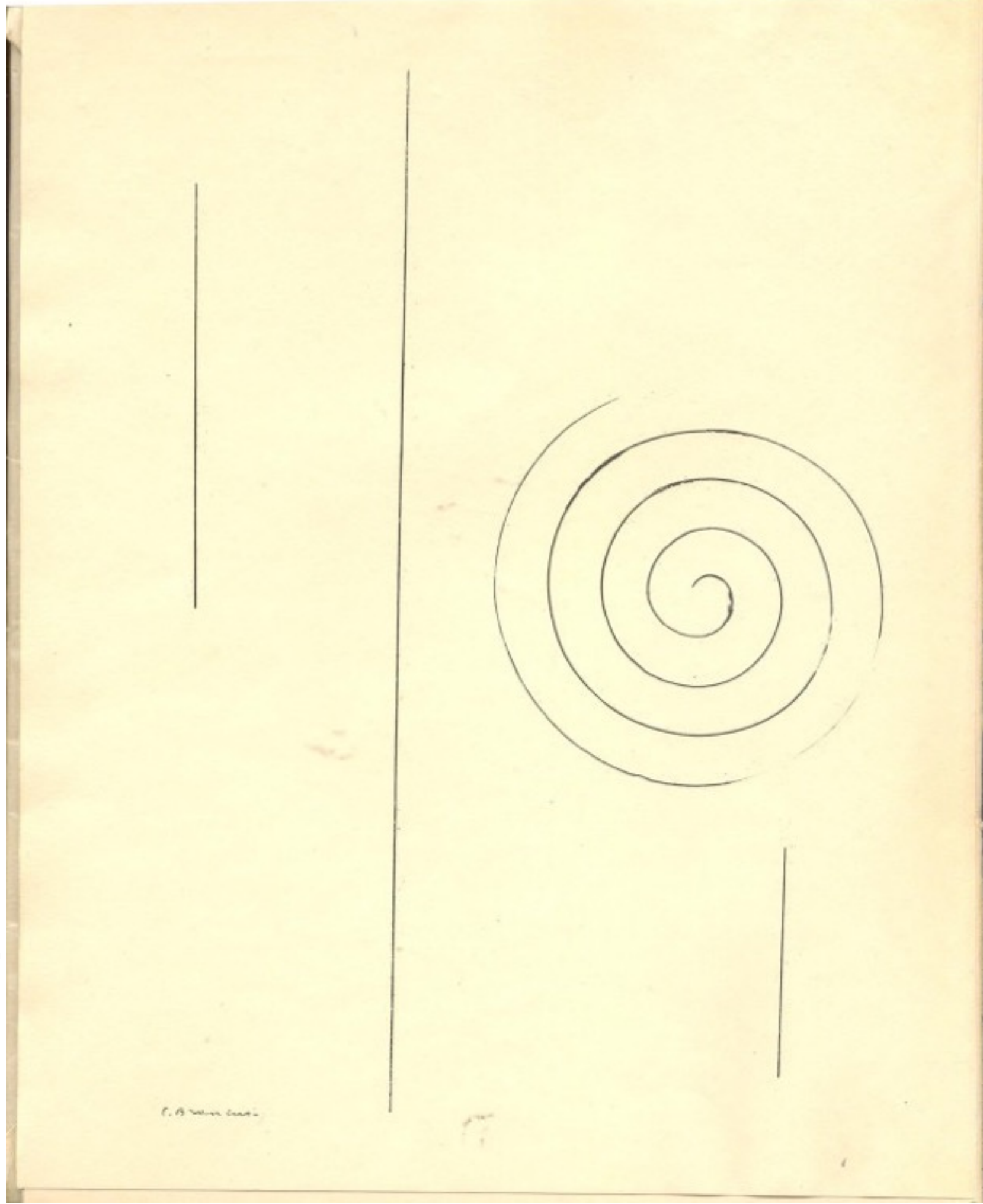
Is that all there is?

Some pictures represent by resembling

This is an important component of their content — *in the broad sense* — which is not simply a matter of the picture being associated with many propositions



C. Brancusi,
*Portrait of
James
Joyce*



Resembling pictures

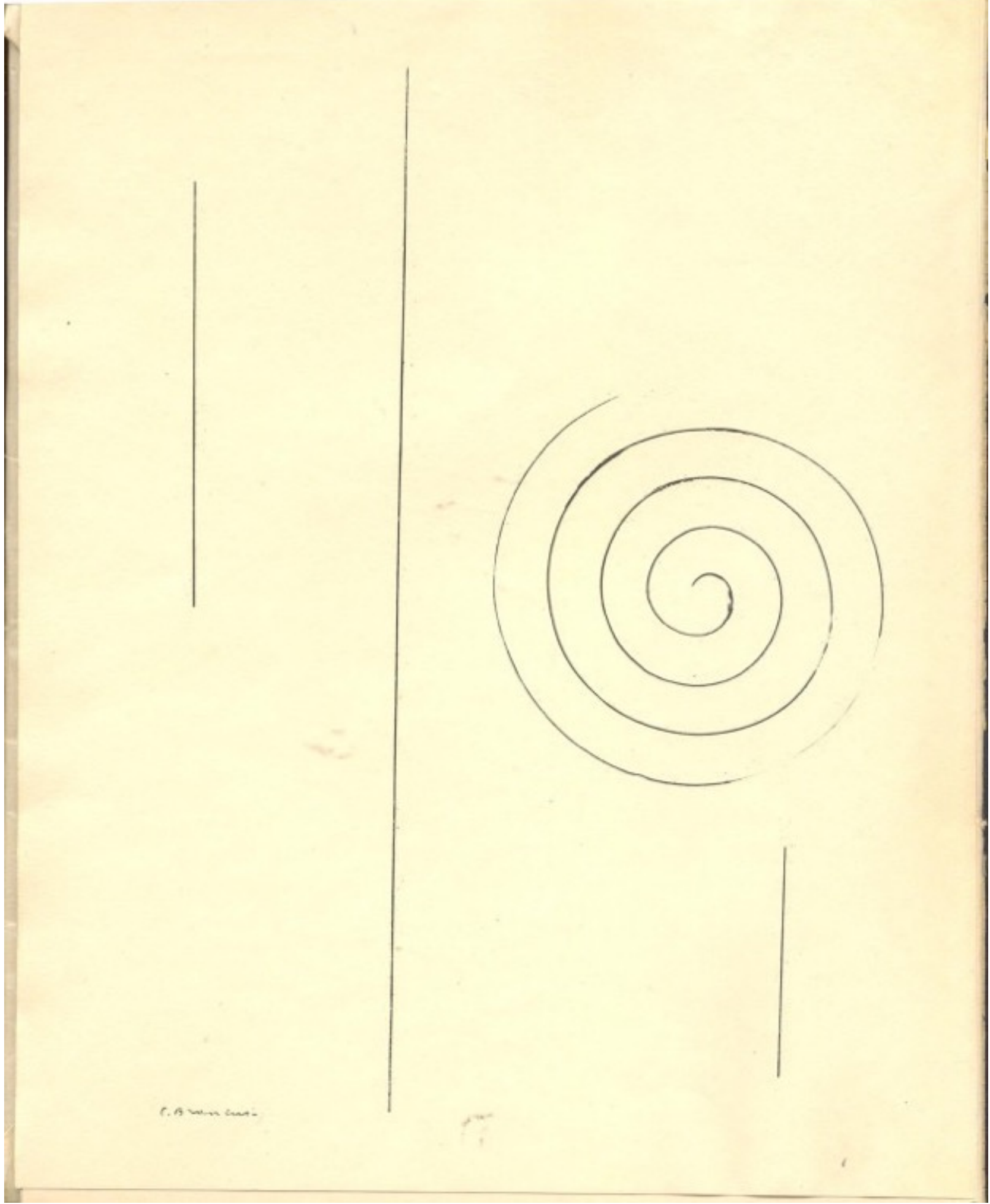
The vehicle is part of the content of such a picture in my broad sense of content

(NB We need to distinguish this from the issue about intrinsic vs derived intentionality)

2. A link between thought and perception: 'acquaintance'?

Pictorial representation has something in common with (visual) perceptual representation:

Sometimes when an artist paints a picture, they are trying to represent *how something looks*



(though
sometimes
not)

Thought

But thought is not like that.

We do not always think by using mental images. And perception is not thought.

Thought and perception can nonetheless be connected

Perception-based conscious thought

In what ways might conscious thought be based on perception?

Can this teach us something about conscious thought?

Three distinctions

A. In knowledge

B. In language

C. In thought



(A) Two kinds of knowledge

- Knowing things and knowing truths
- kennen & wissen
savoir & connaître
sapere & conoscere
saber & conocer
tudni & ismerni
etc.

(This is the only uncontroversial established fact in this week's seminar)

Philosophical interpretation

- Knowing things = acquaintance *or* knowledge by acquaintance
- Knowing truths = propositional knowledge

Russell on acquaintance

- ‘I say that I am acquainted with an object when I have a **direct cognitive relation** to that object, i.e. **when I am directly aware** of the object itself. When I speak of a cognitive relation here, I do not mean the sort of relation which constitutes judgment, but the sort which constitutes presentation’

Bertrand Russell, ‘Knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description’ (1911)

(B) Two kinds of semantic connection

- Quantification: 'some pigs', 'many pigs', 'a few pigs' etc.
- Reference: 'that pig' 'Peppa' etc.

Russell's theory of descriptions

- Sentences containing definite descriptions belong to the category of quantified sentences
- Hence the contrast between demonstrative reference and description

(C) Thought

- Descriptive thought ('general' thought)
- Demonstrative thought (a case of 'singular' thought)

Demonstrative thought

- ‘A “perceptual demonstrative thought” is a thought standardly made available by a **perceptual link** with an object in the external world, and standardly expressed using the **demonstratives “this” or “that”**.’

Imogen Dickie, ‘Perception and Demonstratives’ (2014)

How are the three distinctions connected?

- Russell: genuine reference (using demonstratives) is a relation only to those things with which one is acquainted
- These days: demonstrative thought is based on acquaintance with objects and is expressed using genuine singular terms

Jeshion's 'Russellian Trinity'

- A is acquainted with O iff A can directly refer to O iff A can think of A singularly

Robin Jeshion, 'Two Dogmas of Russellianism' (2015) 70

The acquaintance thesis

- **Acquaintance with mind-independent objects makes demonstrative thought about them possible**
- This is supposed to be a substantial philosophical thesis
- It doesn't just mean: sometimes we think about things because we can perceive them
- Versions of this idea associated with Brewer, Campbell, Dickie, Evans, McDowell, Peacocke, Snowdon etc.

Scepticism

I want to cast some doubt on this thesis, by questioning the use of:

(1) The notion of acquaintance

(2) The notion of demonstrative thought

(1) Acquaintance

- Russell's notion of acquaintance
- The ordinary notion of knowing things/people/places etc.

Russell & contemporary followers

- Russell: 'direct cognitive relation to an object ... when I am directly aware of the object itself'
 - Michael Tye: 'In being conscious of a particular shade of red at a particular moment, say, I **know that shade of red**. How could I not? I know it just by being conscious of it. I may not know that shade of red a few moments later, after turning away; I may not know any truths about that shade of red; but as I view the shade, know it I do in **some ordinary basic sense of the term “know”**.'
- Consciousness Revisited* (2009: 98)

3 marks of knowledge by acquaintance

- Not a matter of degree
- Doesn't require any propositional knowledge
- Event-like, rather than state-like

3 marks of ordinary knowledge of things

- A matter of degree
- Requires some propositional knowledge
- State-like, rather than event-like

Acquaintance and knowledge of things

- Whatever acquaintance is, it is not knowledge of things in the ordinary sense
- But need acquaintance have all these features?
- Maybe not; so which features does it have?
- Is it just perception?

3. Demonstrative thought

- ‘Suppose a fly is buzzing around the room. I’ve noticed it and it’s bothering me. I suddenly see it on the wall and I say to myself, “That fly sure is annoying!”. I’ve just expressed a thought, and a **constituent of that thought** is expressed by the phrase “that fly”. The thought in question I’ll call a “demonstrative thought”, and the thought constituent expressed by the demonstrative phrase “that fly” I’ll call a **mental demonstrative**.’

Joseph Levine, ‘Demonstrative Thought’ (2010)

A particular kind of verbal expression

- ‘For example, the thought you express when you say “That is rolling”, looking at an orange rolling along the table in front of you in an ordinary situation, is a central case of perceptual demonstrative thought’

Imogen Dickie, ‘Perception and Demonstratives’ (2014)

Understanding what is said

- ‘one simply will not have understood a normal use of the sentence “That cup is F” unless (i) one can perceive the cup; and (ii) one thinks, in a way that depends on that perception “That cup is F, that’s what the speaker is saying” (or something along those lines).’

Gareth Evans *The Varieties of Reference* (1982) 72

Thought directly touches the world

- ‘Mental demonstratives are a plausible point at which to locate the mind-world interface, **the point at which thought most directly touches the world**. So any theory of intentionality, of how it is that thoughts are about what they are about, is going to pay special attention to the phenomenon of mental demonstration’

Joseph Levine, ‘Demonstrative Thought’ (2010)

‘Directly touches the world’

- Direct perception
- Direct reference

Saying to oneself

- What is it to think something of the form “That F is G”?
- Is it the same as saying the words to yourself?
- Standard answer: no

Characteristics of demonstrative thought

- A. It is standardly or typically expressed by using demonstrative pronouns, 'this', 'that' etc.
- B. It is made available by perception of an object
- C. It is required for understanding utterances of things of the form 'That F is G'
- D. It is where thought 'directly touches' the world

(A) Specific versus general thoughts and words

- What is the contrast between specific ('singular') and general ('descriptive') thought?
- Having a specific object in mind, as opposed to merely thinking of something as satisfying some condition
- This intuitive phenomenon doesn't always align with the ordinary use of demonstratives and descriptions

Donnellan's distinction

- Donnellan's examples: 'The man with champagne in his glass is happy' (etc.)
- The attributive and referential use of definite descriptions

Keith Donnellan 'Reference and Definite Descriptions' (1966)

The real lesson of Donnellan

- You can express a 'singular' thought based on perception by using a demonstrative *or* by using a description
- Donnellan shows that a specific form of expression is not necessary for a thought to be of the supposed singular kind

(B) Made available by perception

- Ignore 'acquaintance'
- What distinctive psychological kind of thoughts are made available by perception?

Things we think on the basis of perception

- ‘The lake is beautiful’

‘What’s that restaurant over there?’

‘I like to see the silhouettes of the pine trees along the mountain tops’

- Are some of these demonstrative thoughts and some descriptive?
- Are the apparently descriptive thoughts ‘really’ demonstrative thoughts?

Demonstrative thought & perception: some truisms

- We sometimes think about objects because we see them
- We sometimes think about these objects by saying things to ourselves
- We sometimes express these thoughts using demonstrative pronouns, sometimes using descriptions
- None of this implies that there is a psychologically important category of demonstrative thought

Conclusions

1. Russell's notion of knowledge by acquaintance is not the same as the ordinary notion of knowing things
2. The linguistic and phenomenological evidence does not support a sharp distinction between 'demonstrative' and 'descriptive' thought
3. The acquaintance thesis is therefore somewhat dubious
4. We should be careful about connecting the epistemological, linguistic and psychological distinctions
5. We don't have to build our philosophy of mind and epistemology on the rather peculiar ideas of Bertrand Russell

Some references

- Bill Brewer, *Perception and Reason* (2000)
- John Campbell, *Reference and Consciousness* (2002)
- Imogen Dickie, 'We are acquainted with ordinary things' (2010) & 'Perception and demonstratives' (2014)
- Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (1982)
- Robin Jeshion, 'Two dogmas of Russellianism' (2015)
- Joseph Levine, 'Demonstrative thought' (2010)
- John McDowell, 'Singular thought and the extent of inner space' (1986)
- Christopher Peacocke, 'Demonstrative thought and psychological explanation' (1980)
- Paul Snowdon, 'How to interpret direct perception' (1992)
- Michael Tye, *Consciousness Revisited* (2010)

Thank you!

www.timcrane.com