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Philosophy of Mind

2/13/20

IHRTLUHC

<center>Novel Representations</center>

The other day I was having lunch in the dining hall with my friend, Gabe. I was eating quickly; it was the ninth week of our ten week term and I had some reading to get done before my philosophy of mind class. As I was absentmindedly putting bits of food in my mouth, chewing, and swallowing, I realized Gabe had been looking at his plate of a half-eaten sandwich and scattered pile of carrots with a rather thoughtful expression. I asked him what the matter was, and he told me that he had just been thinking about how whenever we're eating, we always have the option to focus our attention on the food and its flavors, or with any other concern that might be running through our heads. In that moment, for the first time, I saw my plate of grilled cheese and tomato soup from Lawrence University's Andrew Commons as an opportunity. I saw it as not a plate of room temperature calories waiting to be heaped into my mouth but as an opportunity to focus my attention of the opportunity I had before me to enjoy my lunch. Thanks to Gabe, that day my lunch was transformed into a novel representation of an opportunity to focus my attention on the present and enjoy the meal I had before me.

In the process of developing theories of intentionality, philosophers entertain various ways of understanding how organisms go about developing and interpreting mental representations of objects found in the real world. Intentionality is the power of minds and mental states to be about, to represent, or to stand for, things properties and states of affairs. A mental state is said to have intentionality if it is a mental representation or it has contents (Jacob). In this paper, I will be exploring the problem that the novel representations present to the theory

of intentionality outlined by Ruth Garrett Millikan in her article entitled "Biosemantics", published in 1989. I will begin by simply exploring Ruth Garrett Millikan's theory as it stands in its own right, with a focus on how her understanding of intentionality deals with the issue of content determination. Put another way, I will focus on how she claims it is that the content of mental representations come to be initially established. I will then argue that the form of content determination called a "novel representation" presents a problem case for Millikan's theory. To conclude, I will offer an explanation as to how Millikan might best resolve the problem.

The particular form of content determination that I will be primarily concerned with, is that of a "novel representation". This is a specific form of representation that belongs to the broader class of mental representations that can be defined by the following: a representation developed in a mind as a response to a sensory stimuli, that is then consumed by the same mind or a different mind, in a manner that assumes the representation is accurately representing (although it may or may not be) the object found in the real world that the representation corresponds to. An example of this form of representation would be a beaver who slaps his tail against the water as a way to warn his fellow beavers that there is a predator in the area. The tail slap is then interpreted by the rest of the beavers as a representation of danger. This is an example explored by Millikan as she explains the role played by consumers in the process of creating and consuming representations.

Millikan would also claim that this representation of danger is able to function effectively because of the association between danger and the tail-slap that had been established by the histories of the correlation functioning correctly (Millikan 501). The further specified form of representations that I am concerned with, are the cases of representation that do in fact function effectively, but do *not* have any history of correlation that can be used to explain their effective

functioning. Again, I will be referring to these instances as "novel representations", and will be exploring how its display of effective functionality despite its lack of a history of correlation presents a problem to Millikan's theory of intentionality.

The primary examples of "novel representations" that I will refer to, will be novel metaphors. Examples include "no man is an island" and "I am a rock". Although common enough that many readers will have heard of them before, the idea is that these metaphors and others that are similar *can* function as novel metaphors. That is to say, in the case where someone is hearing it for the first time, the selected metaphor is able to consistently create in the hearer a representation that has never before been produced. For example, "no man is an island" will consistently produce the imagery of the impossible existence of a man living with no contact or influence from the outside world. These metaphors are able to be consumed in a consistent manner, or understood as implying their intended meaning, by each consumer upon their first time hearing the metaphors. After I establish these types of examples as problem cases for Millikan's theory or intentionality, I will then explore whether or not the two categories of theories of intentionality called *casual-informational* and *functional* might be able to offer a more conclusive interpretation of the novel metaphor.

Throughout this paper, I will refer to the person speaking the novel as "the speaker" and the person hearing it for the first time as "the listener". I will now establish the novel metaphor as a problem case for Millikan's theory of intentionality. In the process of doing so, I will begin by discussing how Millikan would claim the content of the novel metaphor becomes established. I am using the term "content" to refer to the mental imagery or understanding that is developed in the mind of a person as they hear a novel metaphor for the first time.

In her article "Biosemantics", Ruth Millikan attempts to answer the question, what defines certain circumstances as the content-fixing ones? (Millikan 500). This means that in the process of creating a representation, how is the content of that representation established? What defining characteristics are necessary in the developmental circumstances of the representation to ensure that the content of the representation will become fixed? Millikan's response to this question is that content becomes fixed by the way in which a representation is consumed. She states that it is the devices that use representations that determine them to be representations and determine their content (Millikan 501). This discussion is directly applicable to the matter addressed in this paper, namely the novel metaphor. As her explanations apply to the examples in which I am concerned, this means that it is the listeners that are the ones determining the novel metaphors to be representations and determining their content.

I have now established that according to Millikan, the content of a novel metaphor becomes fixed by the way it is interpreted by the listeners. The next question to ask from here, would be, how can one be sure that the content is functioning properly? Again, the content of the metaphor only refers to the mental imagery created in response to hearing the metaphor. This content may or may not be the content that the speaker intended to create. The proper function of the content created by a novel metaphor would be to accurately correspond to the content the speaker intended to create in the mind of the listener. So again, the question to ask now would be, how can one be sure that the content is functioning properly? To this, Millikan would respond that "proper functions are determined by the histories of the items possessing them" (Millikan 501). Upon reading this quote, I'm personally inclined to ask what she is referring to when she says, "the items", and the best response I can come up with to this question is that she is referring to the system using the representation (Millikan 501). In the case of the novel

metaphor, this system, or this "item", would be the listener. It is important to note here, that the novel metaphors in which I am concerned are assumed to consistently develop properly functioning content within the mind of the listener. It is here that the problem arises. In the case of the novel metaphor, the listener has no history upon which they can rely to develop properly functioning content.

I have now established the novel metaphor as a problem case for Millikan's theory of intentionality, and will move forward by exploring whether or not the theories of intentionality called *casual-informational* theories can offer a more conclusive interpretation of the novel metaphor. To begin, I will provide a summary of causal-informational theories in general and from there look at how they apply to the more specific case of the novel metaphor.

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the contents of a mental representation is typically understood as a collection of abstract objects. Examples of these abstract objects are properties, relations, propositions or sets. Casual-informational theories work to address the issue of how this content comes to be determined, or how to specify the naturalistic content-determining relations between mental representations and the abstract objects they express (Pitt, 6). Causal-informational theories maintain that the content of a mental representation, that is to say the corresponding collection of abstract objects, is grounded in the information the content carries about what *does* or *would* cause it to occur (6). I think an example can help to clear things up a little bit. In this example there are three important components; a zebra, a person looking at this zebra from a distance, and the person's belief that they are looking at a horse. The mental representation in this example is a horse. The contents of this mental representation, or the collection of abstract objects that correspond to it, is a four-legged bovine creature. This belief of seeing a horse came to be because the zebra corresponds with the abstract

objects of a four-legged bovine creature in the mind of the onlooker, which then corresponds

with the person's mental representation of a horse. The causal-informationalist would say that

the content of the mental representation of a horse is grounded in any object's ability to cause

that representation to occur. To conjecture how a causal-informationalist might respond to the

case of the novel metaphor, I think it's fair to say that they would argue that the proper

functioning content of a novel metaphor is grounded in what caused this content to occur. In the

case of "no man is an island", this means that the mental imagery of an isolated man unable to

sustain himself would come from combining the mental representation of a man and an island.

To me, this does not feel like a satisfying answer.

Works Cited

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