

LOT2

By

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In G.K. Chesterton's *The Man who was Thursday*, six of the seven anarchists named after different days of the week turn out to be secret policemen. Chesterton's hero Syme finds himself opposed to not just a disparate group of anarchists, but to the unified forces of authority. A similar thing seems to have happened in recent years to Jerry Fodor. When Fodor published *The Language of Thought* in 1975 his targets were, as he says, 'a mixed bag': reductionists, behaviourists, empiricists, operationalists, holists and various followers of Wittgenstein. But today these disparate targets have become distilled into one movement, which Fodor calls 'pragmatism'. Fodor sees pragmatism ('perhaps the worst idea that philosophy ever had') everywhere, and one aim of this sequel to *The Language of Thought* is to stamp it out.

The 1975 book was a landmark in the philosophy of mind and psychology. Fodor argued that thought processes were the product of a system of representation in the brain which, in many important respects, is like a language. (This is the *language of thought*, also known as *mentalese*, or *LOT*: hence *LOT2*.) Fodor argued that thought has a *compositional* structure: thoughts have parts ('concepts'), and these parts combine to make complete thoughts in something like the way words combine to make sentences. Just as the word 'brown' combines with the word 'cow' to make the complex 'brown cow' so the concept BROWN combines with the concept COW to make the complex concept BROWN COW (the upper case is Fodor's way of writing names for concepts). What is more, the content of this complex concept – what it means or signifies – is entirely a function of the contents of its constituent parts and the way they are combined. This is known as *compositionality*.

Thought must be compositional, Fodor argued in 1975, if we are to explain the fact that we can think things we have not thought before (this is the 'productivity' of thought). Someone who can think about brown things and about cows can wonder whether there are

any brown cows, whether or not they have ever considered the matter before. If the concept BROWN COW were not decomposable into BROWN and COW, then this would be a mystery: each new thought would require learning a new complex concept. But this cannot be so, Fodor claims: all we need to think BROWN COW is the concept BROWN and the concept COW. Hence we have good reason to think that thought has a compositional structure: the compositionality of thought explains the productivity of thought.

*The Language of Thought* defended many other controversial ideas, among them the claim that the (thinking part of the) mind is a kind of computer, psychology is irreducible to any more basic science, and (perhaps most controversial of all) no simple concepts are learned, all are innate. The book was admired, lauded, ridiculed, dismissed, feared and plagiarized; in short, it set the agenda in this part of the subject for the next few decades.

The purpose of *LOT2* is to reconsider the doctrines of *The Language of Thought*. Like a lot of Fodor's work from the last ten years, *LOT2* has something of a 'bipolar' flavour to it. Moments of tub-thumping enthusiasm for LOT are followed by moments of gloom and pessimism about the whole project of explaining the mind. But despite his mixed feelings about his own thesis, Fodor never wavers in his attack on pragmatism: the view that thinking or having concepts is explained in terms of abilities to *do* things. On Fodor's classification, pragmatists are a mixed bag indeed. They include (among philosophers) Dewey, Wittgenstein, Quine, Ryle, Sellars, Putnam, Rorty, Dummett, Brandom, McDowell, Dreyfus; and (among psychologists) William James, Vygotsky, Piaget, Bruner, Gibson. Different pragmatists therefore emphasise different abilities in their accounts of thought: abilities to recognize, to classify, to reason, or simply to act as if something was true and so on. A paradigm pragmatist argument is Gilbert Ryle's famous critique of the 'Cartesian' myth of the 'ghost in the machine', and his defence of the explanatory priority of *knowing how* to do something over *knowing that* something is the case. Fodor's opposition is resolutely Cartesian in exactly this sense: 'thought about the world is prior to thought about how to change the world. Accordingly, *knowing that* is prior to *knowing how*. Descartes was right and Ryle was wrong'.

The description of pragmatism takes place at a dizzying level of generality. Card-carrying pragmatists may well object to Fodor's characterization of their views. But the two

main arguments against pragmatism in *LOT2* are themselves relatively specific. The first is that thinking cannot be explained in terms of abilities since the relevant kind of abilities presuppose thinking. Here the key move is that the abilities in question must be sufficiently 'fine-grained': if we want to explain the grasp of a concept C in terms of (say) the ability to obey a rule in which C figures, then we must distinguish obeying this rule from obeying some logically equivalent rule. As Fodor puts it, it must be obeying the rule for Cs 'as such'. The point is meant to apply to all abilities: if we want to explain thinking about triangles in terms of the ability to sort triangles, then we must distinguish the ability to sort triangles from the ability to sort trilaterals, even if triangles are trilaterals. We must appeal to the ability to sort triangles 'as such'. Abilities must be as fine-grained as the thoughts they are meant to explain.

Fodor then argues that the only way for abilities to be as fine-grained as thoughts is if they are themselves derived from thoughts. My ability to follow a certain rule of inference involving C must be derived from my intention to think about Cs *as such*; my ability to sort triangles from trilaterals must be based on my intention to sort triangles *as such*; and so on. Fodor's claim is that only by presupposing thinking can the pragmatist theory begin to account for it.

Fodor's second argument against pragmatism appeals to compositionality. As noted above, the semantic properties of thoughts – their contents, their ability to be 'about' the world – must be determined by the semantic properties of their parts. So if the pragmatist theory is going to explain thought, then it must accommodate compositionality. Fodor claims that if pragmatists appeal to the ability to sort cows from non-cows, they must assume that there are normal conditions for recognising cows. Similarly, there must be normal conditions for recognising brown things. But there is no reason to suppose that the normal conditions for recognising brown cows are in any way a function of the normal conditions for recognising brown things plus the normal conditions for recognising cows. In other words, there is no reason to suppose that complex abilities have a compositional structure. But thought must have a compositional structure. Therefore thought cannot consist in having such abilities.

What then are the semantic properties of thoughts or concepts? Fodor has long held that the essence of thought is 'aboutness': thoughts are about things. Another way of putting this is to say that thoughts have reference. In *LOT2* he continues to defend a view he has had

for some time, that the only tractable semantic property of thoughts and concepts is their reference: this is because reference is the only semantic property which is compositional. This means that any concepts with the same reference have the same semantic properties.

It's pretty clear that the conclusions of these two lines of argument against pragmatism are in tension. According to the first argument, thoughts are 'fine-grained': thoughts about George Orwell and thoughts about Eric Blair can be different kinds of thought, even if Orwell is Blair. This is because to think about Orwell is to think about him 'as such'; i.e. as *Orwell*). Many philosophers have concluded on these grounds that there must be another kind of semantic property, in addition to reference: for example, Frege's 'sense' or 'mode of presentation'.

But according to the second argument, the contents of thoughts are *coarse*-grained: if Orwell is Blair then otherwise similar thoughts about Orwell and about Blair have the same semantic properties or contents. So there seems to be a tension between the claim that thoughts about things must be thoughts about them *as such* and the claim that all that matters to the content of the thought is what it is about.

Fodor is well aware of this tension and spends a whole chapter of the book trying to resolve it. This chapter – the best in the book, in my view – attempts to explain the idea of thinking about something *as such* by appealing to the doctrine of the language of thought. First he appeals to the 'Humean' distinction between simple and complex representations: thinking of the planet Venus as THE EVENING STAR is different from thinking of it as HESPERUS, since the first thought employs a complex concept made up out of the concepts EVENING and STAR while the second does not. This difference in concepts is what explains thinking of the evening star *as such*, as opposed to thinking about it in any other way.

So far so good; but what about when the thoughts only involve simple concepts like HESPERUS and VENUS? Returning to themes of his earlier work, Fodor argues that in order to explain the different roles these representations have in our thoughts, we only need to appeal to 'syntactic' differences between the representations themselves: in other words, difference in their relevant intrinsic properties (their 'shapes' as Fodor used to say). There is no difference in 'content' between HESPERUS and VENUS, only a difference in 'how they

represent' that content: i.e. as HESPERUS and as VENUS. 'If there is something that it seems you need senses to do', Fodor writes, 'either do it with syntax or don't do it all'.

Fodor's description of the 'syntax' of representations as 'how someone represents things' actually brings him closer to his opponents than he might think. After all, Frege and his followers like to describe the sense of a word as its 'mode of presentation' and some contemporary Fregeans (such as John McDowell) have claimed that the different senses of the words 'Hesperus' and 'Venus' can only be described in terms of the difference between thinking of something *as Hesperus* and thinking of it *as Venus*. Although there are many deep differences between Fodor and these philosophers, the difference between using sense or syntax in explaining *representing something as such* is not one of them.

For Fodor, then, differences in the ways things are represented in thought are explained in terms of differences in concepts, and concepts are elements in the language of thought. This much has survived from the earlier work, but *LOT2* develops and expands upon it in various useful ways. A relatively new theme is perceptual representation, to which *LOT2* devotes an interesting but much less satisfactory chapter. Fodor makes a firm distinction between thought and perception, and yet he thinks that perception involves representation of the world ('content'). Since concepts are constituents only of thoughts, it follows that perceptual content is non-conceptual. Fodor describes non-conceptual representation in two ways: first, in terms of being 'iconic' (picture-like) rather than discursive, and second, in terms of 'information' in the merely causal sense (the sense in which smoke carries information about fire).

Once again, these two ideas pull in different directions. Informational content is entirely insensitive to the way in which something is represented: information about Venus is *ipso facto* information about Hesperus. But pictures or icons *do* represent their objects in some ways rather than others: two pictures can represent the very same cat in different ways. For thought, Fodor explains such kinds of differences in terms of differences in concepts; but this option is obviously not available for perception.

But in any case, informational content is not well-suited to being the content of perception, if perception really does represent its objects in specific ways, as it seems to do. What is hard to accommodate within Fodor's picture is the fact that perceptual representation

can be as fine-grained as thought: neither perception nor thought represents things 'neat'. But Fodor's devotion to informational content makes it hard for him to see this.

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