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Words
“Expectation”

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Previously in *Futures*, I discussed a word that we use to form an abstract futures concept: “millennium” [1]. In its most common current usage, “millennium” is an example of a word that provides, and one might even say controls, a future orientation for us. In the present essay, I am taking a different approach to the role of the word that I will be discussing. This word is not an example of a future-orientation; rather it is more of an example of language about future-orientation. The word is “expectation”. To make this distinction clearer, it may help to borrow some of the terminological distinctions made by the American logician, C.S. Peirce. First of all, for Peirce, and indeed for my present purposes, signs include words. More specifically, in a paper dated 1867, May 14th, and published in the *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Science* (Boston), VII (1868) [2] Peirce divided signs into three categories based upon their relationship to their object—Icons, Indices, and Symbols. (Peirce himself used the convention of capitalising the words.) He defined “Icon” as a sign determined by its object “by virtue of its own internal nature”. In comparison, he defined “Index” as a sign determined by its object “by virtue of being in real relation to it”, such as when smoke is a sign of fire. A Symbol, according to Peirce, is a sign determined by its object “only in the sense that it will be so interpreted”. A Symbol thus depends upon conventions or habits.

Thus, borrowing from Peirce’s helpful terminology, one could say that while my previous discussion of the word “millennium” was mostly in its current capacity to give meaning as an icon, I am now regarding “expectation” more as symbolic in the way that it, as a word, gives us meaning. Nevertheless, my exploration of “expectation” remains an exploration of the word, the creation of meaning through it as a part of language, and to a lesser degree, the creation of expectations through language. Psychologists, sociologists, philosophers and natural scientists would all have

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different and additional things to say about the concept or phenomenon of expectation—I want to focus on the word. But while the terminological distinctions which I borrow from Peirce are helpful in distinguishing “millennium” from “expectation”, there is one important way in which my project is very different than his. Insofar as he was interested in a science of meaning, I am interested in an art. For his science, he noted that the history of words, not their etymology, was their key to meaning. For Peirce, that is to say that one must inquire into all aspects of the relationship of signs to objects, including the character of signs and the relationships to the thoughts by which we connect signs to things. I find this to be unnecessarily constricting, given the creative element inherent in using language and given the need to keep open the possibility of multiple futures through language. To see what properly constitutes research into meaning for the purposes of an art, I will look to both a history and an etymology of “expectation”.

1. An etymology

At least since Socrates bantered with Gorgias, wanting to know the definition of the art of “rhetoric”, we Westerners have been believers in the power of defining. Prior to that, in classical Greek rhetoric, definition was considered to be just one of the many common topics under which arguments were grouped for particular subjects or occasions. For these arguments, one could create the substance of a speech—a process known as “invention”. (Other common topics would have included comparison, relationship, circumstances and testimony.) These common topics of invention were not held to be “common” because of some common hardwiring of their users, but because of the common cultural values and constraints that would result in mediating the world through language in recognisably similar ways. (It remains a challenge for future studies to recognise the tendency toward common topics, while maintaining the possibility of multiple commonalities, but taking up that challenge is for another time and place.) Then and there, just as now and here, the definition of a term is commonly regarded as a monad of knowledge, if not truth; a fact that even leads to wisdom. In keeping with the contemporary fashion of irony, one may notice that in announcing a discussion of “expectation” one creates an expectation—an expectation that the discussion will need to define its featured term.

Moreover, if we go so far as to accept the idea that truth is a necessary preface to goodness, seeking definition could deliver us to virtue. In connecting these roles of knowledge and virtue, literary critic Kenneth Burke concluded that “The Good Book” is the apt name not for the Bible, but for the dictionary—today’s standard source of definitions.

Looking to the etymological root of “expectation”, the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that “expect” was a word originally associated with sight in Latin: *expectare*, to look out for. In Greek, the word “*idein*”, from which we get the English “idea”, was also associated with sight. Like “idea”, the word “expect” has undergone a nearly complete metamorphosis. Now both words are concerned only with the abstraction of sight known as knowing. In using either word—“idea” or “expectation”—we have

lost sight of the past connections that both words had with sight, and now have remaining only the abstractions concerned with knowing. The loss of this connection provides the basis for what Berger and Luckman [3] referred to as a “social construction”, or what Peirce referred to as a Symbol—a sign determined by its object only by virtue of convention and habit, not “by virtue of its own internal nature” as would an Icon, or “by virtue of being in real relation to it”, as would an Index.

If we remain cognisant of the connection with sight that the word “expectation” has, we would recognise that when we say that we “expect”, we are reporting that we have a vision. And in having a vision, we are looking away from ourselves at something in another place or another time. In fact, this looking away even applies to ourselves, as Sartre points out when he says “I await myself in the future”. More than that, we have narrowed the focus of this looking to mean looking away toward the futures, not toward the pasts; a tendency found in the word “retrospect”. Thus, once we have established the connection with vision that “expect” has through its root syllable of “-spect”, an important distinction remains between it and “retrospect”. The future-orientation of “expect” would mean that our vision is a vision of possibilities, not an attempt to describe past actualities. So when we say that we have expectations of ourselves, we must posit one or more visions of where and who we will be at some point in the future. How do we go about constructing these visions? What is the material that we use and by what criteria are we able to say that our actual selves ever meet these possible selves that we have envisioned?

We may say “I’m trying to be someone I’m not”. How peculiar. How would this be possible? What could it mean? How could it mean? How would one person know two selves sufficiently to make this statement? Here we have two different levels of expectation. In the first, the speaker has evidently laid out some image of himself that “awaits him in the future”, to return to the translation of Sartre’s elegant phrase. This he may only do if he expects that he will experience being in that scene, being that person, fitting that image, in real time and space, although at a later time and different space. In this way it becomes a little plainer that with the help of the word “expectation” we can talk about the future in ways that suggest that we know it, and in ways that might even suggest we can control it. But “expectation” also has its own limits and perhaps even some limits for us when we employ its powers. I will return to this shortly.

The second level of expectation in this statement is the image that the speaker has of himself as someone other than the one which he posited in the future, awaiting himself. In this second notion of expectation, the speaker is drawing upon the past, and if possible, the present images of himself, and announcing that they in some way are sufficiently different from the self that awaits him in the future such that the two will never meet. Thus, when he lays the matrix of his vision over what he considers to be the picture of his actual present, something is preventing the lines of the matrix from ever aligning. Here, he is awaiting not himself in the future, but someone else; a someone else whom he has rejected; a someone else whom he does not want to be, but suddenly, presently, finds himself being. What is it about our use of “expectation” that makes it possible to reject ourselves? What is the nature of the space between the lines of the matrix of the expected self and the lines of

the snapshot of the actual self such that we could comfortably say “I don’t feel like myself today”? This self that we have envisioned, that we expect, is a self that is not like our actual self in some aspect. What aspect? If the vision is one of a perfect form, of a person whom we would like to be, then we should examine the criteria by which we have created that form. If they are moral criteria, we can see that the commonality of defining words in a way that makes speech possible may also be a commonality of defining ourselves that makes it possible to not be a person fitting the commonality. In trying to be someone whom we are not, or in not feeling like ourselves, we may indeed find ourselves not fitting in with the expectation of a self common to that community—a self created by the image of expectation and maintained in the language of common topic invention.

2. A history

Returning to the limits of “expectation”, one finds that the history of the word “expectation” carries controls on the way that we use it, and on what it means, and on what we can possibly mean when we use it—but we may not be conscious of many, or most, of these things. Here I am not suggesting some sort of magical powers carried by the word as a tangible object, like a linguistic Trojan horse. Rather, I mean the acceptable contexts for the use of the word that we adopt in any living language. The setting of the rules of acceptability is not just the province of language academies—it is the province of the language users as well. The connection between sight and knowing, in the past, the present and in the future, is common in many other English colloquial phrases as well, of course, as with “looking back on it, I should have known better”, “I see what you mean” and “I get the picture”. And even though we have evolved “expectation” to mean exclusively the abstract sense of anticipation, we also still use verbs with literal denotations of sight to mean expectation, as in “I look forward to your arrival”. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we first find “expectation” in 1550, and “expect” in 1560, although the current use of “expectation” dates only to the seventeenth century. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* concurs with the 1560 date. In theory we can hypothesise that at some point the word did begin its current usage, and at the time of its shift in focus, likely still carried all the standard connotations of vision. Users may not have been conscious of how the accepted uses of the word still incorporated notions of vision. Are we today? What might flow from becoming conscious of this? To answer this, we might need to know more about the history of what we regard as vision.

In the ancient world, several different theories of light and vision developed. These theories were based on the premise that there must be some form of contact between the object of vision and the visual organ; only thus could an object stimulate or influence the visual power and be perceived. Much of the literature on ancient theories of vision concerns the debate between intromissionists, who believed that objects somehow emitted rays which travelled to the eye, and extramissionists, who believed that it was the eye which emitted the ray, which ray then travelled to an object. Allowing this debate to spill into the underlying notions of vision associated

with “expectation”, several different possibilities for expectations arise. An intramissionist might find that the world is what is and does what it does, independent of the seer. The seer is only observing that which is there by passively receiving rays in his eyes. But an extramissionist may interpret an expectation as an active creating of “what is there” as he focuses the rays which emanate from his eyes on selected objects. In ancient theories, once a direction for the ray was established, much of the ensuing discussion concerned whether the ray was a real entity, and the nature of the medium through which these rays passed en route to either the eye or the object. What could this mean for expectations? Does our vision of the future travel from our eyes to the future, or does it travel from the future to our eyes? Generally, we would say that it is impossible, of course, to consider the existence and operation of physical properties of light coming to us from an abstraction known as “future(s)”. With that physical limitation, we may be tempted to conclude therefore that the notion of vision that necessarily must be incorporated into “expectation” is an extramissionist notion of vision—a valid inference if this were the only aspect of the history of vision that might shed light on “expectation”. But it is not.

As historian David C. Lindberg has noted, classifying ancient theories of vision only in terms of the direction of radiation overlooks other fundamental aspects of ancient optics, and also make the debate among the various theories seem trivial and those who debated it for a thousand years look foolish.

Particularly while thinking about how language might shape futures, we need to pay attention to all of the debates. Another scheme of classification, based on the aims and criteria of visual theory, is not only more basic, but more relevant to my present consideration of “expectations”. Included in these debates, based on the aims and criteria of the respective proponents, are a mathematical theory, a physical theory, and a physiological theory. The mathematical theory, originating with Euclid and Ptolemy in Greece, and al-Kindi in Persia, offers a geometrical explanation for the perception of space. Although the mathematical theory may be classified as an extramissionist theory, the aims of the theorists proposing the mathematical theory were to develop a “mathematical theory of perception in which the visual cone [the apex of which is at the eye] accounts for the localisation of objects in the visual field, and the apparent size and shape of the objects” [4], not to settle the argument over what the source of the rays is.

A second theory, the physical theory, is said to have originated with Aristotle in Greece, had advocates in al-Razi, al-Farabi, ibn Rushd (Averroes), and ibn Sina (Avicenna) in Persia, and Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas on the European continent. The physical theory is divided between Aristotle’s notion that vision occurs when objects have information transmitted to the eye via a medium, and the atomists’ theory of eidolons (from Greek, *eidola*, and translated often to the Latin, *simulacrum*). For Aristotle, the medium is capable of taking potentially-illuminated objects and making them actually-illuminated objects. This information is then moved through the medium to the eye, and from the eye it is carried to the heart via the blood. Thereby the senses can perceive the form of an object without the matter. Importantly for Aristotle, this notion of “form” meant more than just the shape or the outline. For my present purposes Aristotle’s notion of the medium

remains important. The medium through which we receive (if we are intramissionists) or produce (if we are extramissionists) visions of futures such that we can create expectations is a social, not physical, medium. And if we extend the comparison of Aristotle's physical medium to the social one, we should ask whether the social medium is capable of taking potentially-illuminated social phenomena and making them actually-illuminated social phenomena as we create expectations.

For the atomists, the *eidolons*, which are thin films like the skin of a cicada or snake, and are composed of atom assemblies, are capable of communicating the visible attributes of objects to the eye, so as to create an impression of the object. As such, both types of the physical tradition could be classified as intramissionist, but the aims of works by researchers in this field were to provide a causal or physical account of vision and to explain in physical terms how the visible qualities of objects are communicated to the organ of sight. For research into expectations we might well then seek to provide a causal account of expectations, and to explain in social terms how the visible qualities of social objects are communicated to our organ of expectations.

A third theory, the physiological theory, was announced by Galen in Greece and brought forward by Hunain ibn Ishaq in Persia. It is concerned with the eye's anatomy. The aims of the works in this tradition are to provide a physiology of sight through the anatomy of the eye. Can we provide a physiology of expectations? Would the anatomy of the eye, in explaining the physiology of sight, provide a physiology of expectations? Scientists working in optics have noted that the physiological tradition fails to account for the psychology of the observer, and for his or her "functional capacities", as Aristotle called them. That is to say, we do not directly observe the rods and cones within the eye, but rather people and houses and other three-dimensional objects. For Aristotle, explaining what one picks up as a visual input, that is, integrated three-dimensional objects, is first and foremost in the aim of a theory of vision.

3. Do "expectations" die, or are they immortal?

Somewhere someone (I believe it was Sartre) suggested that we plan our lives by positing the hour of our death and working backward. Indeed it seems that adulthood commences with one's recognition that he or she will die at some real time in the foreseeable future. From this final expectation cascade all of the others between then and now. Past that point, we would have difficulty constructing expectations because we would have difficulty forming visions. We have neither seen an afterlife, nor death without an afterlife. Without the ability to envision it, how can we have expectations about it? Naively, we may extrapolate earthly visions and augment them with other, incongruous earthly visions, like en-visioning or imag-ining bird's wings on a human being in white robe and calling that a soul. Drawing on Effie Bendann's *Death Customs: An Analytical Study of Burial Rites* [5], Zygmunt Bauman [6, p.53] notes that pre-Christian societies "tried hard to convince their members of social guarantees of immortality. Since these were social guarantees, however, they could

in principle be socially managed and socially distributed. (And so they were). The promise of immortality turned into a most powerful disciplinary effort in the hands of society. Like other socially allocated rewards, immortality could be awarded in larger or smaller quantities, depending on the dead's assumed possession of values whose dominance society wished to secure or perpetuate". Even if we do not envision, that is, expect, immortality, we may attempt to speak into being the terms and conditions of our passing from this life. Thus among the many purposes of the death ritual is the one that gives us the comfort of en-visualizing what our own passing will look like—the expectations of our own funeral. And it is the living who inscribe stones and monuments not only as memorials, but as visions of their own place after death. On the other hand, if we accept Bauman's point, and then ask how a promise of immortality is made, we again will hear of expectations.

During a discussion taking place in "the other world", Milan Kundera's Goethe explains immortality to Hemmingway, who in turn finds peace in the loss of expectations:

"That's immortality", said Goethe. "Immortality means eternal trial".

"If it's eternal trial, there ought to be a decent judge. Not a narrow-minded school-teacher with a rod in her hand".

"A rod in the hand of a narrow-minded school teacher, that's what eternal trial is about. What else did you expect, Ernest?"

"I didn't expect anything. I had hoped that after death I would at last be able to live in peace".

Hemmingway goes on to explain his notion of how his written words would have delivered him from expectation:

"You did everything you could to become immortal".

"Nonsense. I wrote books. That's all".

"Yes precisely!" laughed Goethe.

"I have no objection to my books being immortal. I wrote them in such a way that nobody could delete a single word. To resist every kind of adversity. But I myself, as a human being, as Ernest Hemmingway, I don't give a damn about immortality!" [7, p.81]

4. Conclusion

Much more can be said about "expectations", and much more needs to be said about its role in determining future(s) through language. Notably absent from my present discussion are the creation of expectations through the language of commands and the differences in expectations created by the differences in communications media. Do we expect a quicker response, a longer response, a more personal response from a voicemail message than an e-mail message? Another extremely rich and

important area for consideration is the linguistic creation of the negative, which Kenneth Burke finds to be a defining factor of humanity, and which Ogden and Richards explore under the heading of “negative facts”. Can we have a negative without having first voiced an expectation of the positive? And finally, this short consideration of the topic has not paid due attention to the collective voicing of “expectation”—“we expect”, not just “I expect” or “you expect”.

I hope that what I have said here in some ways demonstrates the power of the word “expectation” and also the possibilities of multiple futures due to the possibilities of multiple visions which create these futures.

References

- [1] Junker KW. “Millennium”. *Futures* 1999;31:865–70.
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