

# The unreduced mind

TYLER BURGE

One of the most active and fruitful areas of philosophy during the past fifteen years has been the philosophy of mind. It is arguable that during this period mind has supplanted language as the centre of discussion in Anglo-American philosophy. There are a variety of reasons for such a change. Certain fundamental problems in the philosophy of language led naturally into discussion of mind. There have emerged types of psychology – and the motley of subjects often termed, somewhat presumptuously, “cognitive science” – that provide a stimulating object of philosophical attention. Developments internal to the philosophy of mind have also made it an exciting subject, rich with lines for philosophical development.

Until recently, much effort went into explaining mental acts and states away – into showing them to be mere behaviour or mere activity of the brain, or even nothing at all. Even with the fall of behaviourism and the simpler forms of reductionistic materialism, most philosophers of mind theorized as if they were motivated by a guilty conscience. Their primary objectives were to show that mental events were brain events under non-neural descriptions; and that mentalistic descriptions could be reduced, if not to neural discourse, to discourse about causal relations among states that could be described non-mentalistically (functionally).

The subject has become richer and more interesting with the emergence of more forms of discussion that take mental activity and mentalistic discourse more nearly for granted. Substantial parts of cognitive and developmental psychology, which serve as objects of philosophical reflection, are undergoing liberating development since the fall of behaviourism. Moreover, the rebirth of an old topic has energized the

Christopher Peacocke

A STUDY OF CONCEPTS  
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philosophy of mind. The topic is the conditions under which individuals can think thoughts of certain kinds, or the conditions which individuate thoughts.

This topic has become central because of several arguments that seem to show that what goes into determining what thoughts an individual can think often lies partly beyond the boundaries of the individual's mind, brain, or skin. I will not review these arguments here. Suffice it to say that they have sparked interest in theorizing not about individuals (their brains or their behaviour) in isolation, but about individuals in relation to their environment. The point is not just that individuals depend on their environment causally, to come to be in the mental states they are in. That point is uncontroversial and barely interesting to a philosopher. The point is that the very nature of many mental states presupposes some relations to the individual's environment. They cannot be individuated apart from reference to environmental relations.

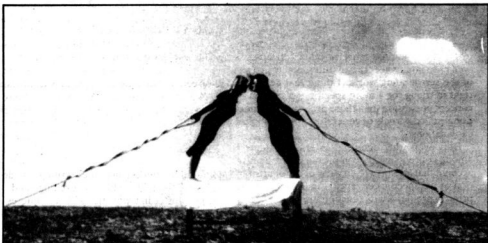
Christopher Peacocke's *A Study of Concepts* is a development of this tradition. Indeed, it is an attempt to produce the beginnings of a systematic theory of possession conditions for concepts. The book is an excellent one. It is difficult reading because it is closely reasoned and makes few concessions to the uninitiated. But it advances a number of fresh, bold proposals; and it provides an attractive combination of sophistication, argu-

ment, strong ideas, and originality. I harbour some doubts about some of the more general ambitions. But I think that there are real advances, especially in the discussion of perceptual concepts and perhaps also in the discussion of the concept of belief.

The primary systematic aim of the book is to advocate a theory of concepts that would eventually become non-circular, necessary and sufficient conditions for the possession of all concepts. These conditions are to take the form “Concept F

questionable explanatory value.

For example, one of the fullest possession conditions that Peacocke gives is that for the concept of conjunction (“and”). The account is used as a paradigm within the book. The idea is that having that concept is finding inferential transitions of certain forms primitively compelling, and just because they are of those forms. The term “primitively compelling” is a technical one, probably an important one, and the author explains it well. For present purposes, it can be taken to mean



Pavel Pecha's untitled toned silver-gelatin print (see page three for publication details)

is that unique concept to possess which . . . where the dots are filled in by a condition that does not specifically mention possessing concept F (or having a propositional attitude involving the concept F), and does not involve any of a variety of more subtle circularities.

Peacocke's reductionism is more modest than that of many other philosophers. But I am doubtful about this sort of enterprise on a variety of grounds. (I might emphasize that many of the specific discussions would remain valuable even if their reductionive were abandoned.) Very few successful explanatory enterprises take a reductionive form. My worry is that the attempt to avoid circularity may sometimes force moves that are of

“obvious”. To be successfully reductionive, the account must presume that it is explanatory to hold that there are forms of inference that are found to be obvious because of their form, where the causal explanation (“because”) makes no assumption that conjunction is part of the meaning or content of the forms of inference. For making such an assumption would be to use in the explanation what one is trying reductionively to explain.

But it is not clear that what makes one find deductions involving conjunction obvious can be illuminatingly specified apart from reference to conjunction. It is not clear what it is to be caused to find something compelling by bearing some relation to a (synthetic?) form – where the causal relevance of one's relation to the form in no way involves understanding, or having, a logical concept like conjunction. What is clear is that a person who possesses a logical concept must find contentful logical truths or inferences compelling; and that their form has something to do with the explanation as to why. But whether the form can carry the burden of explanation apart from the logical content is doubtful. At best, this is something that awaits a better established psychology than the syntactic computational theories that would be congenial to this approach. It does not appear to be an explanation that is a priori acceptable, as Peacocke's theory of possession conditions supposes it to be.

There is another possible problem about the explanation in terms of non-contentful forms to understand the forms as forms of inference, one must have some understanding, however inexact, of deductive consequence (or necessary preservation of truth). But it is not clear that one can have this notion without having the concepts in terms of which particular deductive arguments are expressed. I do not think that such circularities are at all bad. But they do threaten reductionistic explanations.

A second ground of doubt about the reductionism, or perhaps just ground for further development, is that people seem to possess concepts that they only partially understand. The theory under discussion assumes that possession conditions and mastery conditions coincide, except in a few fairly circumscribed cases involving interlocation and deference to others. But partial understanding seems to me to be much harder to circumscribe than the theory presumes it to be. There are “natural-kind” concepts, scientific theoretical concepts, mathematical concepts, that theorists seem to come to understand more and more deeply through deeper theorizing. There seem to be different levels of full mastery of concepts. Some concepts, and their understanding, seem to involve a deep open-endedness to the nature of

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# Trust and reality

A. W. MOORE

the subject matter being conceptualized.

A third source of doubt lies in the sheer complexity of what Peacock calls "local holisms". I think that he is right in trying to say something more specific than what is allowed by what one must mean by "global holism". Such a view maintains that each of a person's concepts is explicable only in terms of all the other concepts, so that one can say no more about the conditions for having concepts than that one can account for them only as the result of some broadly described attributional method. I think that such holism is cavalier and that Peacock is right in attempting to provide more specific accounts of how specific concepts are tied to a limited range of other concepts, as well as to non-conceptual abilities, and to aspects of the surrounding world. I think that he is also right in trying for a more specific explanation of concept possession than those proposed by "functionalist" construals of generalized psychological explanations.

But even the simplest inter-dependencies among concepts vastly complicate any reductive account that attempts to do without use of attributionally specific concepts. The use of such concepts of the primary problems with functionalism is that in any specific applications it is too complex to be illuminating. A similar problem threatens the present approach. I worry that the restrictiveness of the approach limits its illumination, and will do so exponentially as conceptual inter-dependencies are confronted more seriously and in greater detail. I conjecture that no account saddled with a reductive commitment can be both systematic and explanatory/illuminating.

In my view, the strongest parts of the book are the discussions of particular concepts. The treatment of perceptual concepts substantially advances understanding of the specific way that perceptual presentation is environmentally dependent. Peacock's discussion of perception ranges over hearing musical combinations, seeing visual arrays in different Gestalts, orienting one's limbs in space, connecting perception and action. I think that there is more to be done in explicating the difference between conceptual and non-conceptual modes of perceptual presentation. But this part of the book seems to me extremely valuable, regardless of the fate of the system.

The book also has a fresh and challenging discussion of the concept of belief. It attempts to provide a unified account of the first and third-person aspects of the concept. The appeal to consciousness in the account of the authority of self-knowledge seems to me promising. Peacock wants to explain our authority in our judgments about our own propositional attitudes by maintaining that to have the concept of belief partly consists in forming unerring beliefs about one's conscious beliefs. He argues plausibly that there is a notion of conscious belief that does not presuppose accessibility to judgments about such a belief. The relevant notion of consciousness is, however, somewhat elusive and its explanatory connection to self-knowledge is not transparent, at least as I would like. Still, it is an interesting proposal. Although the phenomenon of consciousness is close to home, providing clear conceptions of it has been notoriously difficult. On this topic it is an achievement simply to say something new that is not ridiculous.

There are many other fine things in this book – discussions of the metaphysics of abstract objects, of relations between philosophy and psychology, of normative discourse. In my view, the book is best and most interesting where it is least concerned with reduction or with legitimating mentalistic concepts. It has a richness that repays study, and it seems to me a step toward further loosening the straitjacket of the past.

The domain of the mind forms a wonderfully complex subject for philosophical reflection. The complexity, stability, and flexibility of our mentalistic discourse suggest that its cognitive value is well established. It is comparable in centrality and durability to our discussions about ordinary physical objects. Both philosophy and psychology can contribute a great deal to our understanding of mind without assuming that mentalistic notions must be explained in other terms.

In this bold, energetic and extensive work, Hilary Putnam undertakes a re-orientation of philosophy. He wants to put philosophy back in touch with the "human issues which it has always been philosophy's highest goal to articulate." This involves him in a close investigation of where philosophy is, where it is currently going, where it could be going, and how it could be re-directed. The tone throughout is iconoclastic. If, in fact, fewer readers will find the book an affront to their philosophical sensibilities than Putnam suggests, this is probably due to a small measure to his own earlier efforts. He writes with characteristic breeziness, some would say with characteristic sloppiness, but there is never any doubt that underlying the writing is deep, rigorous thought. This is exciting and engaging stuff, and anyone with an interest in philosophy, at whatever level, will enjoy it and learn from it.

The basic idea is that contemporary philosophy is governed by a completely unhelpful polarization. On the one hand there is scientism. This is the view that scientific methods, and they alone, can provide a true conception of the way things "really" are. "Really" is usually thought to entail "independent of our experience"; so that this conception must be austere,ly physical, not just to the extent of being value-free and morally inert, but to the extent of being divested even of our ordinary concepts of colour, sound, temperature and the like. As Putnam puts it, with delightful inconceivability, "the world as it is independent of our experience, is cold". On the other hand, there is nihilism. This is the view that we should give up all talk of "the way things are", either because the idea of their being any way at all is incoherent, or because it is deconstructed (Derrida – perhaps), or because there are lots of different ways things are: there are different "worlds" that are made by us (Goodman).

The most interesting part of the book, in my view, is Putnam's diagnosis. He thinks that scientism and nihilism are two symptoms of a common sickness, an aversion to *trust*. If we are to accept the world, then we must accept it with trust, because there are no guarantees. Scientism and nihilism are two wild metaphorical reactions to this prospect. Scientism says that we do not need trust: we can accept the world through a self-guaranteeing conception of what it is "really" like. Nihilism says that trust is of no help: there is no world there for us to accept.

Towards the end of the book, Putnam presents Wittgenstein and Dewey to us as examples of philosophers who teach us how to trust and who thereby suggest a way forward for philosophy itself. By discussing Wittgenstein's views on religion, and Dewey's views on democracy, Putnam seeks to describe a kind of philosophical understanding that is honest, sympathetic and open, seeing itself as one flawed conception among others. As a result, we come to see the important middle ground between scientism and nihilism. Yes, there are a way things are. There is no doubt even way they "really" are. Our beliefs have something to answer to, and we can be in touch with it, but no, there is no one privileged conception of what this reality is like. No matter how we represent the world, even if we do so accurately, our representations will be conditioned by particular interests, values and non-transcendent norms of rationality.

Of the countless things here that deserve to be singled out for special attention, I should like to comment briefly on – and to put in a word for – one particular variety of scientism, that which Putnam finds in Bernard Williams. Having in an earlier book castigated Williams for exhibiting "an enthusiasm for [his position] ... coupled with complete innocence of actual scientific

Hilary Putnam  
RENEWING PHILOSOPHY  
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knowledge", Putnam now engages in an altogether more respectful and sustained critique of Williams's views. Williams believes that there can be an "absolute conception of reality", a conception made up of representations that are not conditioned in the way just sketched, in other words that are not (peculiarly) from any point of view.

It is important that this is an issue about what is possible, and not about what exact scientific theories are like. This in turn imposes a special burden of clarity on Williams's opponent. Is the objection simply that any representation of ours must be from a point of view? Or is it that there is some particular point of view, the point of view of humanity perhaps, from which any representation of ours must be? The former claim is

compatible with our being able to abandon any given point of view. But if we can abandon any given point of view, then it is hard to see what should make it impossible, and not just difficult, for us simultaneously to abandon them all, if not precisely the kind of nihilism that Putnam rejects. It makes more sense to adopt the latter, more radical position. But then the designated point of view must be (as it were) off-stage. For how can we identify a point of view and claim that all our representations are from that point of view without, in the very process of doing this, being the claim? And once the point of view is off-stage, we seem bound to admit that an absolute conception of reality is possible. For when we look at what remains on stage, which is all that we can look at, we see the possibility of a conception of reality which we must at least take to be absolute; and what we must take to be absolute we must, willy-nilly, take to be absolute. (This argument is of a kind that Putnam himself toys with more than once. It provides another variation on a theme that is familiar to philosophers through the work of Kant, Wittgenstein and indeed Putnam: the collapse of a "transcendental" denial of realism into an unregenerate affirmation of it.) If, finally, an absolute conception of reality is possible – and here we must remember that, for all that has been said so far, such a conception need not be complete, it need not itself make any reference to conceptions, and it need not contain anything to indicate its own absoluteness – then who can gainsay the right of scientists to insist that what they are working towards is precisely that?

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