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NATURALISM AND THE METASEMANTIC ACCOUNT OF CONCEPTS

Sílvio Pinto

Abstract
In chapter 5 of his 1992 book *A Study of Concepts*, Christopher Peacocke claims that his account of concepts can be reconciled with naturalism. Nonetheless, despite Peacocke's greatest efforts to convince the skeptics that the mentioned accommodation is viable if one accepts his approach to concepts, some suspicion survives. In a recent paper on this very topic, Jose Luis Bermudez raises questions about Peacocke's supposed naturalization by arguing that the approach in question is not able to make sense of the distinction between misapplying a concept one nonetheless possesses and not possessing that concept at all. What I am going to do here is, on the one hand, defend Peacocke's concept naturalization project from Bermudez's objection and, on the other hand, show that the latter's suggestion cannot save the surely crucial distinction between making a mistake in using a concept and being incapable of a mistake or a correct use because of not having the concept.

1. Introduction

In chapter 5 of his 1992 book *A Study of Concepts*, Christopher Peacocke claims that his account of concepts can be reconciled with naturalism in the sense that, for instance, the normative relations between a concept and its respective applications will supervene upon certain inferential dispositions which Peacocke takes to be constitutive of the concept's possession by a thinker. This means that apparently non-natural notions like that of a concept and its associated norms can be accommodated within the natural order by connecting it through the supervenience relation to the notion of an inferential disposition. Nonetheless, despite Peacocke's greatest efforts to convince the skeptics that the mentioned accommodation is viable if one accepts his approach to concepts, some suspicion survives. In a recent paper on this very topic,[1] Jose Luis Bermudez raises questions about Peacocke's supposed naturalization by arguing that the approach in question is not able to make sense of the distinction between misapplying a concept one nonetheless possesses and not possessing that concept at all. Bermudez suggests that the naturalization of concepts should take the direction of incorporating more complex dispositions—for example, the

[1] Bermudez 1999.

disposition to recognize mistakes. What I am going to do here is, on the one hand, defend Peacocke's concept naturalization project from Bermudez's objection and, on the other hand, show that the latter's suggestion cannot save the surely crucial distinction between making a mistake in using a concept and being incapable of a mistake or a correct use because of not having the concept.

2. Peacocke's Concepts and Naturalism

Wittgenstein's[2] and Quine's[3] devastating criticisms of linguistic meaning have prompted the appearance of various alternative philosophical theories of conceptual content. In dubbing them philosophical I do not mean to imply that there are no empirical elements in these theories or that there were no empirical motivations for their construction; the point is just that they were more sensitive than other merely, let us say, psychological approaches to the role of concepts in the explanation of our intentional activities. Thus, for instance, Fodor's most recently presented account[4] is, in my opinion, an attempt to come up with a philosophically as well as empirically adequate theory of concepts. Another example of sensitivity to both psychological and philosophical requirements about the nature and role of concepts in psychological explanation is Christopher Peacocke's so-called metasemantic account.[5]

According to Peacocke, concepts are abstract objects which constitute the content of beliefs or judgements; they must be located at the level of mental content or, as he puts it, at the level of Fregean modes of presentation. A Peacockean concept is constituted by 2 elements: its possession conditions and its determination theory. At the level of possession conditions, a concept consists of a certain kind of inferential disposition, namely: that inferential disposition which is constitutive of possession of a certain concept. A requirement of the metasemantic approach is that the statement of a concept's possession

[2] In Wittgenstein 1953, §§ 138-243. Wittgenstein's criticism was vigorously revived in the 80s with Kripke's crucial interpretation of the rule-following considerations as putting forward a skeptical challenge about linguistic meaning, a challenge not just about its constitution as also about its epistemology (Kripke 1982).
[3] For example, in Quine 1951 and Quine 1960, chapter 2.
[4] In Fodor 1998.
[5] This terminology is employed by Peacocke in Peacocke 1993. But Peacocke's account of concepts is first presented in Peacocke 1992.

conditions must not make use of the concept being explained. Let us illustrate this with a simple example: that of the concept of conjunction. Peacocke offers us the following possession conditions for conjunction:

> It is that concept *c* to possess which a thinker must find primitive compelling inferences that instantiate the following forms:

$$\frac{A, \quad B}{A \; c \; B} \qquad\qquad \frac{A \; c \; B,}{A} \qquad \frac{A \; c \; B}{B}^{6}$$

Notice that the introduction and elimination rules for *conjunction* are taken to be constitutive of possessing this concept. The idea is that to accept inferences of the above form without any further justification—to accept them as the most basic forms of inference regarding this concept—is tantamount to possessing *conjunction*. Notice also that the 'must' above is not deontic but merely modal. Moreover, it must be added that the attitude of finding an inference of a certain form primitively compelling can be interpreted naturalistically if we think of it in terms of the simplest attitudes associated with having a concept. Up to now, no conceptual norms have come into the Peacockean picture.

The second basic constituent of a concept is what Peacocke calls its determination theory. Given a set of possession conditions, this theory together with how the world is (for empirical concepts) tells us which semantic value the concept has. This semantic value is automatically determined once it is required that the beliefs and belief transitions that are constitutive of possessing a concept are true and truth-preserving respectively. Let us illustrate this again with *conjunction*. The semantic value which renders the above constitutive transitions in thought truth-preserving is the familiar truth-function [(*A*,*B*)(TFFF)].

With the determination theory, conceptual intentionality and normativity make their way into Peacocke's account of concepts. This is because truth itself is a normative notion

[6] '*A*', '*B*' and '*A c B*' stand for propositional contents.

and will be used to explain conceptual norms. When we say of a belief content that it is true and truth is understood as some kind of correspondence between this content and the world then a type of correctness is being attributed to the content in question. The same act of truth evaluation for belief contents produces reference (or semantic value) patterns of evaluation for all its constituent concepts. Once the references of concepts are in their place, we can then talk about conceptual content and conceptual norms. For the fact that each concept has its worldly reference commits us to applying the concept in accordance with this reference. If a concept is not applied according to its reference, then this will be a clear case of concept misapplication. The explanation of how intentionality comes to figure in Peacocke's account is similar. The intentionality of a conceptual disposition—i.e. the fact that such a disposition is directed upon a certain class of objects—can only be accounted for once truth and reference are appealed to; only when the referential liaisons between concepts and their respective referents in the world are clarified via the determination theory can we have a glimpse of what it means to say that a concept has a determinate content.

This is a very brief sketch of Peacocke's account of conceptual norms and it only covers a concept's direct relation to the world; it certainly does not say anything about the normative relations between concepts; those relations which have to do with the rationality of employing certain concepts as constituents of propositional attitudes in the light of the other propositional attitudes of the thinker as well as of his actions. The fact that concepts induce various kinds of norms of their acceptable application might suggest that they cannot be reconciled with a naturalistic world view. So, for anyone who is sympathetic to Peacocke's approach to concepts the challenge of harmonizing concepts with naturalism will turn out to be a live issue. But first of all, something about naturalism must be said.

Peacocke envisions two types of naturalism: the first about truth and the second about explanation. A naturalist about truth holds that all truths supervene on descriptive truths; this version of naturalism may be compatible with the fact that the supervenience basis contains also other possible worlds besides actual world descriptive truths. Such a naturalist may hold that the truth about causal laws supervenes on descriptive truths that include other possible worlds. A naturalist in this sense might say: the fact that 2 types of

events *A* and *B* are related causally means this could not have been false without the obtaining of a falsehood in its supervenience basis.

A naturalist about explanation maintains that any facts or states-of-affairs must be capable of being explained causally; this does not exclude of course that other types of explanation may be provided. Let us take as an illustration the case of human conduct as described intentionally. Suppose that somebody appeals to beliefs and desires in order to rationalize an agent's deeds. I want to understand why somebody committed a certain crime and discover that she hated her victim because the latter had stolen her boyfriend. In the light of this and other mental states of the criminal it is possible to give a rational explanation of her action. If we are naturalists about explanation this will not fully satisfy us; there must also be a causal explanation of the action. It may be that most of the causes of our actions are not reasons for us (they may be non-intentional, for example); the important thing is that mental events (including the conceptual content of mental items) must be in causal interaction with other mental as well as non-mental events.

In what sense then could the metasemantic approach be incompatible with naturalism? At the level of possession conditions, I guess nobody would complain of incompatibility given that the notion of an inferential disposition is perfectly acceptable from the naturalistic point of view. For if the concern is with naturalism about truth then Peacocke could say that the statement of a concept's possession conditions are merely descriptive truths about a thinker; such a statement describes a complex disposition of hers. Of course, when a certain set of possession conditions is coupled with its corresponding determination theory then conceptual norms arise. But they arise only because we are interested in a very specific kind of adequacy between the disposition in question and the world: the adequacy between having a given conceptual disposition and applying it systematically to a specific class of objects. The idea of supervenience in this case boils down to this: if we have truly described the conceptual disposition of a thinker then there cannot be a change in the set of these truths without a change in the conceptual norms supervening upon them.

When it comes to naturalism about explanation, then it may appear that a correct explanation of mentality and more specifically of conceptual mastery must go beyond the

mere inserting it in the natural causal order; it may look as if here we are forced to appeal to requirements of rationality in order to make the best sense of mentality in connection with human action. Suppose that we want to explain why someone did such a such (say, crossed the river by the bridge) and say that this is because for this person doing this was the most rational thing to do in the light her motives (for example, given that she believed that crossing the bridge was the most efficient way to get to the other side and that she wanted to cross the river). Our explanation here is surely not causal; our appeal to rationality fills our need to understand the action as the most reasonable thing to do in the light of the motivations behind it.

Now, take the case of conceptual mastery in relation to use. Peacocke could very well say that conceptual dispositions are the causal antecedents of concept application (for example, in the categorization of objects). But this is also compatible with maintaining that concepts play a role in the rational explanation of concept application behavior. Thus, suppose a thinker forms a judgement that an object of her perception belongs to a certain category and expresses this verbally and believes that by uttering these articulated sounds she serves her purpose of expressing this judgement. In this case the action is just linguistic; the rational explanation of it requires not just attribution of conceptual dispositions to the agent but also of such dispositions with a precise content. If her conceptual dispositions possess these contents and if she had these beliefs and desires then her linguistic behavior can be understood as rational. As mentioned above, this non-causal explanation of behavior is parallel to a causal explanation of it.

This distinction of two levels of explanation—the causal level of conceptual dispositions and the rational level of conceptual content—makes room for the compatibility between naturalism concerning explanation and the metasemantic approach. Similarly, the distinction between two levels of truths regarding concepts—normative and factual truths—and the relation of supervenience of the former upon the latter should take care of the compatibility between naturalism concerning truth and Peacocke's account. This seems convincing enough to me as a reconciliation of naturalism with conceptual norms. However, as mentioned in the introduction, Bermudez remains skeptical about Peacocke's attempt. Let us then turn to his objection to Peacocke's naturalistic approach.

3. A Conflict Between the Metasemantic Approach and Naturalism?

Using as an illustration the possession conditions for the concept *if...then*, Bermudez claims that no matter how these possession conditions are understood—either normatively or descriptively—they cannot solve the problem of naturalistic accommodation. For if they are understood descriptively—that is, as expressing psychological laws about the judgements thinkers would normally find primitively compelling—"then no room is left for the important distinction between not possessing a concept and failing correctly to apply a concept which one nonetheless does in fact possess."[7] On the other hand, if these possession conditions are understood normatively, then we can explain why subjects fail systematically to find primitively compelling transitions in thought they must normally accept as primitively evident if they are to possess the concept, but only at the cost of making the abyss between nature and norms insurmountable.

This is the objection; let me elaborate it a bit. Bermudez suggests the following set of possession conditions for *if...then*:

> It is that concept *c* to possess which a thinker must find primitively compelling inferences of the form:
>
> $$\frac{A\ c\ B,\ A}{B} \qquad\qquad \frac{A\ c\ B,\ \neg B}{\neg A}$$
>
> and must not find primitively compelling inferences of the form:
>
> $$\frac{A\ c\ B,\ B}{A} \qquad\qquad \frac{A\ c\ B,\ \neg A}{\neg B}$$[8]

Bermudez also mentions the famous experiment performed by Wason and Johnson-Laird—the so-called Wason selection task—as well as another one described in a paper by Lance Rips.[9] Both experiments show that subjects systematically violate the above-mentioned possession conditions. So, what can one conclude from this? Well, Bermudez draws the

[7] Bermudez 1999, p. 83.
[8] Again, 'A' and 'B' designate propositional contents.
[9] Rips 1983.

conclusion that the metasemantic approach fails to reconcile conceptual norms with naturalism.

But the conclusion needs another premise to be drawn, namely: that subjects in the experiments above do in fact possess the concept *if...then* and that they are rational.[10] Otherwise, one could easily explain the result of the experiments by saying that the majority of the subjects do not have this concept; perhaps they acquired a similar concept. The evidence provided by the experiments is compatible with this; nonetheless, it is also compatible with the subject's possessing the concept although failing systematically to apply it correctly. The trouble, according to Bermudez, is that if the latter hypothesis is correct then the possession conditions for *if...then* cannot be interpreted descriptively. If one chooses to side with the metasemantic approach then the following dilemma forces itself as a result of this choice: either possession conditions should be understood as natural laws concerning what thinkers normally find primitively compelling, in which case we must deny that the majority of thinkers have the concept *if...then*, or possession conditions should be understood normatively, in which case the metasemantic approach and naturalism must come apart. It appears that the choice for Peacocke is between extreme implausibility in the face of the experiments—holding that the subjects by and large do not have the concept of material implication—and a non-naturalistic account of concepts. Neither of them seems terribly appealing.

Moreover, Bermudez claims that if possession conditions are read descriptively, then no sense can be made of the crucial distinction between not possessing a concept and systematically or sometimes misapplying a concept one nevertheless possesses. This is because in the case of the systematic non-satisfaction of a given set of possession conditions[11] by a group of thinkers no room is left for the hypothesis that these thinkers possess the concept associated with them although they keep on misapplying it. But concept possession must surely allow for the possibility that a subject has a concept she nonetheless occasionally or systematically uses incorrectly.

[10] Bermudez 1999, p. 82.
[11] Understood of course descriptively.

Now, is Bermudez right in this charge against the metasemantic account? I think not. However, the way to defuse the objection will depend on which specific aspect of the account Bermudez blames for the failure to draw the above-mentioned distinction.

4. Naturalistic Accommodation of Concepts: More Complex Dispositions

If he takes the problem to reside in the fact that the metasemantic approach relies on too simple a notion of disposition which ties the possession of a concept with a very specific set of inferential dispositions, then I think the objection is misguided.[12] But before giving my reasons for the contention that it misses the target I would like to recall that a similar objection was leveled at Kripke's normativity argument[13] against the dispositional account. As we are all familiar, Kripke's meaning skeptic refuses to accept that dispositions to answer in certain ways to certain questions could ever constitute a given linguistic meaning on the grounds that individual dispositions cannot on their own generate the norms we normally associate with linguistic meaning. Some of the reaction to Kripke's objection to the dispositional account expressed itself as a complaint to the effect that the linguistic dispositions considered by Kripke were too simple; the suggestion then was to face meaning skepticism with more complex linguistic dispositions. This is, for instance, what Scott Soames has once suggested.[14]

The reason why I take Bermudez's objection understood as a complaint about the simplicity of Peacocke's inferential dispositions to be off-target is the same as the one which leads me to think Soames' complaint about Kripke's argument against dispositionalism misses the point. Kripke's point is that the speaker's dispositions, no matter whether simple or complex, cannot generate conceptual norms if these dispositions are considered on their own. Kripke suggests that the generation of these norms requires the

[12] That this is a possible reading of Bermudez's complaint I conclude from the last paragraph of his paper in which a suggestion is made that "a naturalistic approach might move towards a statement of possession conditions incorporating lawlike generalizations about the dispositions which possessors of a given concept might have in certain specified circumstances to modify judgements which occupy the same role relative to a given concept as the fallacy of affirming the consequent does to the concept if...then." (Bermudez 1999, p. 85)

[13] The argument is expounded in Kripke 1982.

[14] In Soames 1997.

comparison between the subject's linguistic disposition with the dispositions of a linguistic community. In other words, the possibility of evaluation of one's linguistic dispositions requires an external pattern: in this case, the community's linguistic dispositions.

Soames in turn insists that the complex dispositions to produce numerals in response to questions 'What is $n+m$?' plus "dispositions covering cases in which I 'check and revise' my work, dispositions to insist on one and only one 'answer' for any given question, dispositions to strive for agreement between my own answers and those of others, and so on"[15] will suffice to generate the norms associated with meaning because linguistic meaning supervenes upon complex linguistic dispositions. The point however remains: the more complex dispositions appealed to in order to explain the normativity of meaning *addition* by '+' do not provide the external standard required to judge about whether a given linguistic act regarding an expression is *correct* or not in the sense of being in accordance with the meaning being attributed to the expression.

Peacocke claims that conceptual norms require the interaction of a concept's constitutive inferential dispositions with its respective determination theory. That is, these dispositions, again no matter how complex they might be thought to be, cannot on their own bring about conceptual norms. An external standard is required; in this case, the truth preservation of the belief transitions which constitute their respective concepts. A certain application of a concept—say, conjunction—can only be deemed correct if it is according to the dispositions whose constitutive belief transitions are truth-preserving. The relevant point here is that the association of a disposition with a certain conceptual content with the consequent coming into being of the norms for its correct application cannot be established if the only explanatory notion at our disposal is that of the subject's disposition.

Now, Bermudez insists that there are at least 3 clear-cut cases of concept application to be accounted for: a) subjects generally satisfy the possession conditions for a given concept; b) subjects do not generally satisfy these possession conditions but can be made to see their mistakes; c) subjects neither generally satisfy these conditions nor can be brought to recognize their mistakes. This is what he says about them:

[15] Soames 1997, p. 229. The dispositions in question here are those associated with our use of the word '+'.

> Read descriptively, the possession conditions must provide a prediction that is (by and large) accurate of the attitudes that thinkers who possess the concept will take to judgements involving that concept. (Bermudez 1999, p. 82)
> If Peacocke's possession conditions are read descriptively, then no room is left for the important distinction between not possessing a concept and failing correctly to apply a concept which one none the less does in fact possess. If a thinker does not find primitively compelling the inferences that he must find primitively compelling, or finds primitively compelling inferences which he must not find primitively compelling (...) then by Peacocke's lights he fails to possess the concept. But it seems clear that either of these things could happen and yet it still be true that the thinker possesses the concept. (Bermudez 1999, pp. 83-4)

Cases (a) and (b) are those in which subjects possess the concept while in case (c) they do not. Cases (a) and (b) differ, however, in that in the latter subjects misapply a concept occasionally or systematically. The attitude of accepting as evident in normal situations the inference forms constitutive of a given concept is certainly present in case (a) and may be present in case (b) but what according to Bermudez distinguishes this latter case from (c) is the presence in (b) of the disposition to recognize a mistake in the application of the concept. A clear statement of Bermudez's opinion on this is, for example, the following:

> Instead of having possession conditions formulated purely in terms of lawlike generalizations about the judgements which a concept possessor will find primitively compelling, a naturalistic theory might move towards a statement of possession conditions incorporating lawlike generalizations about the dispositions which possessors of a given concept might have in certain specified circumstances to modify judgements which occupy the same role relative to a given concept as the fallacy of affirming the consequent does to the concept if...then. Those circumstances might need to be specified in social terms, so that a crucial element in what it is to possess a given concept might be a sensitivity to the way in which that concept is employed within a given community. (Bermudez 1999, p. 85)

The similarity between Bermudez's and Soames' proposals consists in that both suggest the complexification of individual linguistic dispositions so as to make room for the correctness and incorrectness of concept application as well as to the absence of concept possession. If that was all Bermudez had to say about the evaluation of concept application, then his proposal would be open to the same objection that a Kripkean would launch against Soames' approach, namely: that the possibility of evaluating concept application

involves an external criterion of correctness. We have seen above that Soames' proposal does not satisfy this requirement.

The last sentence of the above quote indicates, however, that Bermudez might have some sort of Kripkean community view in mind. Nonetheless, further reflection shows that his hinted-at position is rather precarious. For, on the one hand, if the really crucial notion in the account of conceptual norms is that of an individual disposition to correct one's mistakes then the account falls prey of Kripke's objection. On the other hand, if the above individual disposition is to be further judged correct or incorrect by a member of a certain linguistic community then it must be asked whether agreement or disagreement in judgement could suffice to constitute the norms of concept possession. After the publication of Kripke's book, some philosophers[16] have come to maintain that the judgement dependence of communitarian standards for correct application of conceptual content would inevitably blur the distinction between correctly applying a concept and merely believing one is doing so.[17]

Besides, Bermudez forgot to mention that case (a) may also branch off into 2: (a*) subjects generally satisfy the possession conditions for *c* and they realize that their application of *c* is correct; (a**) subjects generally satisfy the possession conditions for *c* but they cannot be made to realize that they are using *c* correctly. Consistency here demands the introduction of a disposition to recognize that one has gone right in applying *c* in order to explain the difference between (a*) and (a**). My point in insisting on a further complication of the dispositional account is the following: on the one hand, we must recognize that from an external observer's point of view the difference between the cases where subjects do not possess a concept and cases where they do relates to a more complex form of behavior in the latter case; on the other hand, I feel we must also recognize that from the concept user's point of view the difference between the two types of cases concerns the absence or presence of intentional behavior with respect to *c*. And although I

[16] For example, John McDowell in McDowell 1984, p. 49.
[17] The famous Wittgensteinian distinction between thinking one is following a rule and actually following it (see Wittgenstein 1953, § 202). This is the appearance-reality dichotomy concerning rule-following or concept possession which is crucial if we are going to conceive judgements about rule-following or concept possession as capable of being objective and not merely subjective.

could concede to Bermudez that the complexity of behavior may help to characterize the difference between possessing and not possessing a concept, I also agree with Kripke and Wittgenstein that it cannot fully characterize such a difference. This is because concept possession is a paradigmatic example of intentional behavior and as such it must be guided by norms which are primarily available to an observer (an interpreter) but also to the agent herself (the concept user).

5. Naturalistic Accommodation of Concepts: The Metasemantic Approach

But can the metasemantic account handle Bermudez's objection successfully? Let us now examine this issue. First of all, sense must be made of the dilemma Bermudez poses to Peacocke's possession condition, namely: that they should be read either descriptively or normatively. The descriptive character of the possession condition of a concept amounts, once again, to a statement of the normal behavior of a community of concept users with respect to a specific group of inferential dispositions. In contrast, the normative reading of possession conditions entails, according to Bermudez, that in order to possess a concept *C* "a thinker *ought* to find instances of transitions T_1 ... T_n primitively compelling because they are of those forms."[18]

I believe that the statement of possession conditions cannot have a descriptive reading in Peacocke's account because it specifies the criterion of identity of a concept by appealing to a set of basic attitudes of a thinker towards the form of some inference patterns; it gives necessary and sufficient conditions for possessing the concept just like a definition would do.

As to whether the normative reading of possession conditions is the correct one, that will depend on what kind of norms we are dealing with here. If Bermudez just means that finding certain basic forms of inference trivial in virtue of their form is for Peacocke the only criterion for judging about the possession of conceptual dispositions by a thinker then I totally agree with him. If, on the other hand, he understands by the normative reading of possession conditions the claim that on their own—that is, isolated from their determination

[18] Bermudez 1999, p. 82.

theory—they state conceptual norms, then in my opinion this is just a misunderstanding of Peacocke's position. As we know, the notion of a conceptual norm comes into play only when the content of its respective concept is identified. We normally say that a concept is correctly or incorrectly applied to an object when the concept's content is transparent to us. The identification of a specific conceptual disposition is not yet the individuation of its associated content. The latter is achieved in the metasemantic account by the requirement that a certain set of belief transitions constitutive of a concept's possession conditions be truth-preserving—this is tantamount to linking the conceptual disposition in question to its respective determination theory.

If, however, finding inferences of a certain form primitively compelling is, according to the metasemantic account, *the* criterion for possessing a given conceptual disposition, then how could one maintain, as Bermudez does, that subjects possess a concept whose possession conditions they do not systematically satisfy? I think the answer is not hard to find: what Bermudez in fact suggests is something far removed from the metasemantic account; he is playing with the idea that there is an alternative criterion for affirming that a subject possesses a concept—that is, a subject who is in a position to recognize her mistakes in the application of a concept does possess it.[19] That this is clearly not part of Peacocke's theory of concepts I have no doubt Bermudez would readily agree. The question is whether within the strict boundaries of the metasemantic account it would be possible to make room for the crucial distinction between not possessing a concept and using incorrectly a concept one nonetheless possesses.

Let us go back to Bermudez's preferred example: the Wason selection task; let us also suppose that the possession conditions of *if...then* are the ones mentioned in section 3. How could the metasemantic account explain the results of Wason's famous experiment without being subject to Bermudez's objection? If we want to stick to Peacocke's theory of concepts, then we must say that the majority of the subjects of the experiment do not possess the concept of *if...then*; their systematic non satisfaction of its primitively compelling inferences constitutes our touchstone for claiming this. This would of course

[19] Bermudez 1999, p. 84.

not mean that these subjects did not have concepts associated with the inferences they found systematically compelling; perhaps, some of these is a concept very similar to *if...then*. The above is a first explanation of the experimental results which is compatible with the metasemantic account. But then is this account not incompatible with having a concept and nevertheless failing systematically to apply it?

I do not think so. The account in question is surely incompatible with having a concept and failing systematically to recognize the most trivial inference forms that are constitutive of it; but it is certainly comfortable with the possibility that the subject possesses a concept she fails to apply correctly in the non trivial cases. Thus, in the Wason selection task, one might alternatively explain the failure of the majority of subjects by saying that the mentioned inference forms are not the strictly constitutive of *if...then*; there must be more trivial inferences essentially associated with this concept. Knowledge of what these inferences are for each concept probably involves knowledge of what a subject learns to do when she moves from not having the concept to actually possessing it. Such an explanation obviously involves saying these subjects did after all possess *if...then* in spite of the fact that they failed to find the form of the *modus tollens* trivial; this is a second explanation of the results of the experiment which is in line with the metasemantic account.

As to the first explanation, let us recall, it consists of the already mentioned claim that the majority of subjects does not possess *if...then* understood to be constituted by *modus ponens*, *modus tollens* and not by the fallacies of the affirmation of the consequent and of the negation of the antecedent. Even if we chose this first explanation there would still be a gap between not possessing a concept and failing to apply correctly a concept one nonetheless possesses. For it is perfectly imaginable that the subjects who got it right in the experiment might get it wrong with more complicated inferences involving *if...then*—say, an inference which included Peirce's law.

Bermudez finds this first explanation extremely implausible because, according to him, the strongest evidence that the subjects in the experiments do possess the concept is that they can be made to recognize their misapplication of the concept in the most basic cases. But the mentioned evidence can only be counted as evidence for concept possession if we have already accepted that there is a second criterion for possessing a concept,

namely: the subject's disposition to recognize her mistakes. And the defender of the metasemantic account should not accept this second criterion. Still, is it not all the same implausible to hold that subjects do not possess *if...then* when their poor results in the experiment seem to be connected with a failure to recognize instances of *modus tollens* but they can be brought to see that they have gone wrong? Again, I think the friend of the metasemantic approach has at least a way out; it is open to her to say that the trivial inference forms constitutive of *if...then* do not include *modus tollens* and that therefore the subjects may possess *if...then* although they in general have difficulties with recognizing this inference form.

6. Conclusion

Ever since it was proposed, the metasemantic account has been the target of objections of various kinds. A very popular one holds that the constitutive/not-constitutive distinction for beliefs and inferences associated with a conceptual content cannot be drawn for Quinean reasons. I have tried to defuse this objection elsewhere.[20] Here I have concentrated exclusively on Bermudez objection to the effect that the metasemantic account is incompatible with naturalism. If we accept Peacocke's parsing of naturalism—and it seems that Bermudez has no qualms with it—then there is nothing to worry about: conceptual dispositions are naturalistically acceptable both in the sense of being the supervenience basis of conceptual norms and in the sense of providing causal explanations of concept application.

Sílvio Pinto

Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Iztapalapa

pint@xanum.uam.mx

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