The Linguistic Turn

To what extent is knowledge in the use of language rather than what language is about?

MRes Philosophy of Knowledge:

(slides available at http://cfpm.org/mres)

An Example Conversation

Boss: *Why are you late?*
Employee: *Sorry, the traffic was terrible.*
Boss: *But the traffic is always terrible, why don't you start for work earlier?*
Employee: *I put a lot into this company, I work later than most.*
Boss: *We've all been waiting for you, the meeting started 20 minutes ago.*
Employee: *Anyway, you were late last week.*
Boss: But that was unavoidable, my plane was delayed.

- *How* can we understand what is going on here?
- Are we justified in imputing intentions, motivations etc. onto the participants?
- Don't we have to understand this as part of a "language game"?
- Isn't our response just part of a wider language game?

Basic Idea of the Linguistic Turn

- That many problems of philosophy (and wider, the relation of meanings) are better considered as linguistic problems

- For example: "Does God exist?" might be answered by exploring what was *meant* by "God" and "exist" (e.g. by looking at other sentences where these occur)

- Marks a shift away from knowledge about an external world to how language works and is used

Some simple consequences of the linguistic turn

- Issues of truth and knowledge are superseded by issues of usage and maybe meaning

- Ideas and concepts (which, *at best*, are difficult to pin down) are replaced by considering linguistic examples

- Philosophy is not (at all) *outside* the things it studies but very much part of it, since it is also (only) a linguistic activity

Analytic Linguistic Philosophy

- It is claimed that many apparent problems in philosophy are merely the result of linguistic confusion (Ayer and after)

- That the job of philosophy is to "dig down" into the meaning of words and hence clear up these linguistic confusions

- Dummet's fundamental axiom of analytical philosophy is that "*the only route to the analysis of thought goes through the analysis of language*"

Wittgenstein and
Ordinary Language Philosophy

- That (almost always) the meaning of a word is defined by its use in ordinary language
  - "*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*" (Tractatus)
  - "*the meaning of a word is its use in the language*" (Philosophical Investigations)
  - "*What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence*" (Tractatus)
- Thus rejected any special role for philosophers in unearthing "true" meaning

More on Wittgenstein

- Ordinary language is accepted as the given rather than idealised or 'clarified'

- No such thing as a 'private language'

- Original reference established by language use in context

- Linguistic meaning often involves circular chains (or webs) of words and phrases

- Considered how language is often used in "language games", e.g. formal greetings

After Wittgenstein: Austin, Searle, Gardenförs etc.

- Many *utterances* such as commands, expletives, questions etc. can not be understood as being either *true* or *false*

- Thus language is often better considered as just another form of action – a *speech act*

- *Action is primary, pragmatics consists of the rules for linguistic actions, semantics is conventionalised pragmatics and syntax adds markers to help disambiguation (when context does not suffice).* Gardenförs

Influence of the linguistic turn in Social Science

- Motivates a move away from finding the truth *behind* social situations (e.g. the *intentions* of participants) towards studying what people say and do

- Social science concepts valued less for their representational properties as their ability to effect change when used

- Academics seen not as outside their phenomena (as observers) but as participants involved in the phenomena

Examples for Discussion

1. In small groups…

2. Choose some of the questions from Section A on the distributed sheet

3. Decide which come about because of confusions with/different uses of language

4. Could they be phrased differently to avoid problems with language?

Two incommensurable worlds?

1. That of narratives in language that relate to other language in an identifiable and richly meaningful (albeit subjective) way - the 'qualitative'

2. And that which can be represented as the results of (somewhat objective) measurements and other formal models – the 'quantitative'

Can these paradigms be bridged by any means other than subsumption?

Is language self-contained?

- If one asks for the meaning of a word what one is told is itself composed of language – this 'move' does not escape language

- But if one asks for the meaning of a map and is told "Its a map of Australia", does this imply that the meaning of this bit of paper is some words?

- Do the great apes (who do not have a language) have no knowledge (e.g. when showing their offspring how to get ants out with a stick)?

- Does this not ignore the fact that language is first learned by an infant who has none?

The Cognitive Turn

- That since cognition *comes before* language that it is more *basic*

- E.g. things that seem to be real for the great apes (objects, social relations etc.) seem to exist without language

- Aspects of our psychology determine the shape of our thought and hence is the foundation of our knowledge

- Thus *attempts* to reassert the philosophical concerns of belief, knowledge etc.

The Cultural Turn

- Language is a part of culture – more, it is inextricably *embedded* in culture (although culture is primarily expressed using language).

- Much cognition is also culture-dependent

- Truth claims and other "meta-narratives" need to be critiqued in turns of the interests and power relations that underlie them

- This is related to
  - Post-modernist philosophies
  - Femiminist philosophies

Post-modernism

- A strong critique – *that one cannot ignore the power relationships behind any text* – questions of truth and power cannot be separated

- Playfully "disrupts" received conceptions by exploring different meanings and interpretations of texts (deconstruction)

- Often mixes in ideas/styles from different schools and eras

- Has a strongly relativist flavour – "there is no meta-narrative"

- Unclear as to what one *can* do

Feminism (as a philosophical position)

- That the whole way in which argument and truth is dealt with is biased by the historical male domination and methods

- In the past many conceptions/frameworks *have* been shown to be biased by culture

- A whole range of positions within this

- A denial of the right of one group to insist its version/framework about truth etc. is right

- In style tends to use narrative, synthesis and example more than argument

Another Exercise

In groups….

- List the philosophical issues that you might talk about in your assignment

- Talk about the language you have used to express these… could they be expressed differently?

- How much do these issues arise from the use of language/words?

- Do you have any issues in common?

A Brainstorm of Issues….

Back to the nature of philosophy

A critical reflection on some characteristics of philosophy

- Seeking abstract truths above or behind the world of contingencies and particularities…

- …and the backlash against this.

- The tendency to 'seal off' its issues from other concerns (making it its only critic)

- The fact that philosophy is such an intensively *linguistic* activity

- Shaped by ungainsayable 'moves'

- An obsession with certainty and generality

What has been gained so far?

- Some strong critiques, especially useful when applied to ones own work

- An indication of some of the traps and dangers in some assumptions and approaches

- Some different ways of reflecting about (or framing) issues

- A (sub)language and a developed culture for talking about such issues

The End!

- Slides and materials are on the website http://cfpm.org/mres (2014-2015 subfolder)
- Come and talk to me if worried or stuck in the coming week
- I will email you all to arrange a time to discuss the content of your assignments (after I have decided the mark!) to help you develop the ideas towards your research
- Any comments/suggestions about the course, please email me!
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