

*Our common language allows for a variety of true descriptions, reflecting the availability of a variety of alternative conceptual perspectives with respect to any one state of affairs. Developing understanding in education involves promoting children's conceptual capacities to see the world from numerous perspectives and to appreciate relationships between alternative conceptualisations and their concomitants, rather than merely presenting them with the prevailing image endorsed as right.*

DENNIS A. HEWISH\*

## Conceptual Relativity and Understanding

It is a commonplace observation that our ordinary language provides the resources for a variety of true descriptions of any object, event, or state of affairs. There is no *fundamental* object-language whereby objects, events, or states of affairs can be described with non-contextually determinate "objectivity": whatsoever descriptions are offered in any context are judged by criteria of contextual appropriateness rather than by some putatively non-contextual or omni-contextual "objectivity". Our having access to such a varied range of descriptions with respect to any object, event, or state of affairs, is a mark of the extent to which we have mastered the intelligent use of our natural language. It is also a reflection (in some way I do not propose to analyse) of our conceptual capacities — the intellectual flexibility we have acquired in exploring the resources of our language, and the skills we have developed in coming to adopt different conceptual perspectives with respect to the "same" objects, events, or states of affairs. By "same" I do not wish to suggest, contrary to my thesis, that there is an objective of reality of which we have direct knowledge independently of our conceptualisations. Nor — as it stands — do I wish to deny such a suggestion, but to ignore it. Since my present concern is with human conceptual thought, involving those mental capacities we acquire in learning a language, I should urge a *semantic* analysis of "same" in this context, in terms of the substitutability of different descriptions and referential expressions, surrendering any claims to ontological determinacy.<sup>1</sup> That "ash-tray", "bowling trophy" and "silver objet d'art" all count as true descriptions of the *same object* on my desk does not imply that any one of these descriptions (or any other description) tells what the object *really* is, but rather that I can substitute the

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\*Doctoral candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto.

<sup>1</sup>This position has affinities with that adopted by Quine in his "Ontological Relativity," *Journal of Philosophy*, LXV, No. 7 (April 4, 1968), pp. 185-212.

various descriptions in various contexts to refer to what I, through exercising my acquired conceptual capacities, have individuated from the rest of the universe and adorned with social, utilitarian, or sentimental significance. Even such apparently non-interpretative referential expressions as "it" or "the thing" or "object", and even the ostensive gesture, depend on principles of individuation which, in any cultured human context, are language-dependent. I wish to emphasize the differences between these human intellectual (i.e., conceptual capacities and the merely *discriminatory behaviour* of which humans and most other animals (and some plants) are capable.<sup>2</sup> No doubt my cat can discriminate between the evil-smelling thing I call an ash-tray and the sweet-smelling thing I call a chocolate-bar, but he does not conceptualise these objects *as* an ash-tray or a chocolate bar. Nor does he conceptualise them as evil- or sweet-smelling. In the sense in which I am using the word "concept", the cat does not conceptualise at all (at least so far as I can tell). No doubt he does discriminate, and his discriminations appear to be in accordance with some principle of individuation, but this seems to be *my* interpretation of the cat's behaviour, not the cat's. Further, the way in which my cat appears to individuate the universe, seems (to me) to be largely dependent on his sense of smell, and I consequently suspect that whatever principle of individuation governs his discriminations is quite different from the principles of individuation I have at my disposal. All animals are born with more or less latent discriminatory capacities, given the normal functioning of their sensory organs, but, in the case of humans, these are extended and radically transformed when *conceptual* capacities are acquired through learning a language. *How* this happens may still be largely a mystery, but *that* it happens is quite obvious to all but the most insular behaviourists. And one of the most felicitous benefits of this transformation is the power it gives us to adopt the aforementioned variety of conceptual perspectives: to see the "same" things from a number of different points of view in different contexts, for different purposes, according to different interests.

What has been said above regarding descriptions can likewise be said of other units of language and semantic systems such as mimes, gestures, and performatives, although in some contexts strict conventions apply which severely limit the range of acceptable expressions, or even stipulate a one-and-only acceptable expression (e.g., in legal documents, rigorous scientific journals, and marriage ceremonies). But the main point to be stressed is that none of these formal systems, as universes of discourse or as diverse conceptual perspectives of an appropriately individuated universe has any a priori claim to ontological determinateness. Such claims as some of them do put forth from time to time (e.g., the current claims of some hard-thinking scientists, or the former claims of medieval theologians) seem to be indicative of their contemporary *Zeitgeist*, though

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Peter Geach, *Mental Acts* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), pp. 16-17.

the intelligentsia of each age may be quite confident that they are in possession of final answers. To know the world, in that human sense of "know" being herein emphasized, is necessarily to conceptualise it, and thus to individuate it and interpret it in accordance with capacities acquired through growing up in a community of public language users. Likewise, to act intentionally (in the basic sense of "intentional", i.e., as involving the conceptually informed intellect<sup>3</sup>) is to have knowledge of one's own actions, and to conceive what one does in terms of these same acquired capacities. No science of human behaviour which ignores this dimension of human *mental* capacities can adequately characterise those aspects of our lives which differ radically from the lives of brutes.

The thesis of conceptual relativity, as I shall call it, springs from the observation that no natural language consists of merely *one* conceptual perspective, but that all of them possess, in varying degrees, a built-in substitution or intra-translation system — the means whereby literature is made possible as well as science. The thesis is very simple: that we have at our disposal a variety of ways of conceiving the universe or parts of it, and that we do conceive the same things in quite different ways for different purposes in different contexts, with some knowledge of the relations between these different conceptual perspectives.

This insight helps to shed light on the nature of human understanding (at least from one point of view) and on ways in which the process of education might be better directed towards its development in young people. "Understanding" is a term which has evaded precise analysis so far, especially in those senses of the term which bear most directly upon the educative enterprise. Its apparent inscrutability is marked by the difficulties one has in trying to specify, for example, the necessary and sufficient conditions for A's understanding of x. Perhaps much of the difficulty has arisen from our neglect to keep in mind two aspects of human epistemic psychology which must bear heavily on any analysis of "understanding". Firstly, it is a *continuum* term which, unlike "pregnant" or "dead", but like "maturity" and "scientific", does not appear to involve a critical threshold to demarcate its absence from its presence. (Of course, we can, for various purposes, more or less arbitrarily select a point on the continuum which we shall regard as a threshold, but the fact remains that, like anything which can be present in degrees, it may be present in exceedingly small degrees even below the threshold.) Secondly, its analysis essentially involves human abilities or capacities, a realisation which the old representationist and causal theories of mind underrated. To have a concept of x (surely a necessary condition, though hardly an illuminating one, for understanding x) is to have a constellation of abilities which are exercised in making judgments about x. But what is the necessary nature and extent of this constellation of abilities whereby we

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. Wilfrid Sellars, "Being and Being Known" in his *Science, Perception and Reality* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 41-59.

could decide whether A has the concept of  $x$  or not? This question, it seems, can only be answered by arbitration, for while we can specify some necessary conditions in the absence of which we would deny A's having the concept of  $x$ , there does not seem to be a sharp dividing line between his having it and his not having it. When, for example, can we say a child has the concept "mother"? When he first gurgles "Mama"? When he can use the word "mother" in sentences? If so, how many sentences? And how many mistakes will we allow him? Certainly, the present writer has the concept "mother" but this does not mean he never makes mistakes in judgments about mothers. Indeed, it would seem that A's making a mistaken judgment is often good evidence *for* his having a certain concept, e.g., if he says "It's raining" on hearing the neighbour's garden hose, it seems pretty clear that he has the concept of "rain". Difficulties arise in education when we are seduced into assuming a kind of disjunctive logic in the matter of children's acquisition of concepts. We cannot meaningfully make judgments about whether Johnny has the concepts of "Prime Minister" or "three" without reference to a context. What counts as having the concepts "three" and "Prime Minister" in Grade 1 is quite different from what counts in Grade 6. So long as Johnny has a certain constellation of abilities exercised in judgments about beads and blocks, we are content to say he has the concept of "three" in Grade 1, but we would not expect him to be able, at that stage, to select the only prime number in the set 6, 3, 8, 2. Similarly, we would be reluctant to concede that Johnny has the concept "Prime Minister" if, after he completes high school, he does not also have the concepts "party" and "cabinet." (It also may be the case that we sometimes have some conceptual capacities yet lack familiarity with the appropriate words — but that is another matter beyond the scope of this paper.)

If the above analysis is correct, it seems that the roots of human understanding lie obscured in our innate behavioural capacities, and that these develop and change in ways beyond our present comprehension, to reach full flowering in the sophisticated mastery of language. The point at which most educators become interested is when the child has acquired a modicum of conceptual capacities in mastering the more elementary bits of his native language. Most of the educative process seems to involve extending and modifying the child's stock of conceptual capacities, increasing the areas of the universe (individuated in various ways according to the disciplines which make up his curriculum) over which the child has power to make judgments. This same process is often called "developing his understanding" or "increasing his knowledge", but so long as we remember that it is the child's *capacities* which are being thus extended and modified (and capacities are always capacities *to do* things, "doing" including "thinking") we shall not be misled by the passive views of intellect associated with such terminology. Such passive accounts of intellect, incidentally, have had quite pervasive influence on the ways in which educators have conceived their task, exemplified in those views of

the pedagogic enterprise as essentially teacher - directed. Yet one often feels that the child - centred educational theories which came into vogue a generation ago, though welcome reactions against the passivist tradition, somehow swept the teacher out of the spotlight only to replace his directives with a barely warranted confidence in the child's capacity for autonomous "growth" through, e.g., "experience", "discovery", and similar empiricist mysticisms.

A view of the pedagogical enterprise which is essentially based on extending and modifying the child's intellectual (and other) capacities implies a conception of mind as *active*, and replaces "storehouse" metaphors of intellect with a conception more appropriate to the current educational and philosophical Zeitgeist. Something of this flavour is to be found in various forms of behaviourism, though the basic concepts of "stimulus" and "response" seem to play roles in that system almost as mysterious and inscrutable as "experience" plays in the empiricist tradition. Nor can this inscrutability be side-stepped by opting for an analysis in terms of overt behavioural dispositions.<sup>4</sup> There may have been moderate successes achieved by the new science of behaviour, but it has made virtually no progress in giving satisfying accounts of *intentional* behaviour *per se*. This is mainly because it assumes a relation of identity or reducibility, *salvo sensu*, between the intentional and extensional orders — an assumption which may or may not have heuristic value in formal systems, but which certainly violates our common-sense intuitions. At their best, dispositional analyses of mental capacities distort the factual realm into a hypothetical one; at their worst they claim that my raising my arm (*thus*) is identical with my waving to someone. (When you think about it, some forms of behaviourism are hard put to distinguish between celibacy and impotence.) My mental capacities are facts about me: predictions in the hypothetical mode are *based on such facts*, and are not explications of them. The process of education is not, or not merely, a matter of modifying the behavioural dispositions of pupils, but a far more complex (and worthwhile) one of modifying their conceptual capacities, even in so - called physical education. We don't just train or condition pupils to behave in certain ways; we help them develop capacities to act in various ways, and to understand what they are, or could be, doing in certain contexts and why.

If, *per impossibile*, we merely gave children *one* conceptual perspective of the world, we would be indoctrinating them, since there could be no provision for them to consider alternatives. A good deal of what is done in contemporary schools, especially in our current enthusiasm for science, comes dangerously close to doing just that. We zealously present the prevailing image *endorsed as real*, implicitly imbuing it (perhaps only through the carelessness that often accompanies zeal) with some utterly

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<sup>4</sup>E.g., in Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949).

unsupportable claim to omni-contextual appropriateness, or worse, an ultimate ontological determination which suggests that other perspectives are worthless or irrelevant diversions. Teachers of the humanities have usually refrained from competing with their scientific colleagues, and a generation or two of children have emerged from our schools either convinced of the primacy of the scientific image, or with compartmentalised intellects which lack alternative or synoptic perspectives.<sup>5</sup> Of course, I am not advocating a competitive engagement among teachers of the various disciplines to command the strongest allegiance from the child, but I would endorse moves towards interdisciplinary emphases. Our task is primarily to develop the child's understanding of the world and his multitude of involvements in it, and not simply to advance the claims of the various disciplines.

This brings me to my final point about understanding. Mere conceptual flexibility, the capacity to adopt a range of conceptual perspectives, is necessary but not sufficient for understanding. Not all perspectives are equally cogent or useful. The prevailing images, characteristic of the contemporary intellectual scene, must receive closer attention in education, but not to the neglect of alternative considerations, lest we run the risk of indoctrination with its concomitant deepening of the prevailing intellectual ruts. The main support for interdisciplinary emphases, from the standpoint of epistemic psychology, is that it allows for scrutiny of the relations between alternative conceptual perspectives. I do not pass you the object on my desk *qua* objet d'art to ash your cigarette, nor do I take pride in it *qua* ash-tray. In some ("literal") contexts, I pass you the ash-tray, but in others ("literary"), for the sake e.g., of humour, you may ask me to pass you the bowling trophy to ash your cigarette. Or, more seriously, I may rail vehemently against American aggression in Vietnam, while you plead the case for their pacification program. If neither of us can see the logic of the other's conceptual perspective of the "same" conflict, we cannot *understand* each other's position. If our argument is to be truly dialogical, allowing for due consideration of each other's point of view, then we must possess the conceptual flexibility necessary for adopting alternative perspectives. But we must also see the functions and supports of the various perspectives: what is counted as evidence; what further constructions such perspectives enforce upon one's view of the facts and how changing perspective affects and is affected by one's view of the evidence and of other facts; in short, the *relations* between different conceptual perspectives and their *interrelatedness* with their concomitant conceptual environs. In such disputes the frequent

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<sup>5</sup>Although Wilfrid Sellars argues strongly for the ontological primacy of the scientific image (as in an ideally completed theoretical science) he does not then advocate scrapping the manifest image (a congeries of more or less common-sense perspectives) but eloquently calls for a welding together of the two images to give us a synoptic view of the universe as *our* world. See his *Science, Perception and Reality*, pp. 1-40.

occurrence of such objections as “That’s only your point of view”, “You’re ignoring (or playing down) some of the facts” and “You’re putting your own construction on things” attests to the essential nature of many arguments, viz., each disputant tries to persuade the other to adopt a different conceptual perspective. As Austin’s work on speech - acts suggests<sup>6</sup> the illocutionary strategies and perlocutionary effects of disputation — what the participants *do with words* — are of at least equal interest and importance to philosophers (and a fortiori to educators) as other considerations such as the truth of their propositions. What people *do with their conceptual capacities* — the epistemic psychology of mental acts — is a field of study requiring urgent attention from educationists and philosophers. When we have a better understanding of that, then we might be in a better position to formulate appropriate new perspectives of teaching and learning, and of the *relationships* between teaching and learning. So long as we lack an adequate account of these, we shall remain in a position where we cannot do very much to improve it.

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<sup>6</sup>J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1962).