

Of Knowing, Telling, and Showing

I know that I know but not how I know what I know.

It's a puzzle I like to play with.

What I know is what it is, for if it were not, I could hardly feel that I know it. (If something were so different that I didn't feel "Ah, this is such-and-such!", well, then I couldn't feel that I know it.)

As Socrates said, to know is to recognize.

The moment he said that, he jumped to a conclusion:

if something is recognized, it must exist; and by "exist" he meant exist by itself and for itself; which is to say, it had to be "there" whether he knew it or not.

Socrates, of course, did not invent this. He merely said what everyone feels when he "recognizes" something.

In fact –

note that "fact" comes from *facere*, "to make" (see Vico), and whenever one says "in fact", one is actually saying: "the way I've made it."

In fact, the trouble with "existence" started, with the very first line of this text, because "to know", given the way we normally use it, implies a split between two things, one that does the knowing, and another, an "it", that is submitted to that act.

Every time words are used, words such as "it", "what", "he", and "she", or simply names of items which we somehow feel we recognize, we tacitly assume that these words point to some things, things that "exist", things that are "there", whether we mention them or not.

But if any such thing were "there", how could I "know" that thing here, where my mind is?

Light waves, you say, or photons?

How would one know about those? Light waves and photons (and Professor Gibson's "invariants") may be quite useful fictions to "explain" some mechanism or other, but they are certainly not what you and I see when we look at each other, a landscape, or a rose. The rose I see, smell, and know is exquisitely my own. It's not yours or anyone else's, and it's certainly not a physicist's explanation. It's an item I have concocted of bits of my own experience. (*Rosa mea facta est*)

The mystics, of course, and some that would not want to bear that name, speak of other forms of knowing or simply assume that they have another way. I have no reason to deny it, but if there is another way, I should not call it "knowing". Indeed, the way I make it or feel it or see it, I would not call it at all.

Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.

God bless Wittgenstein. When he made the distinction between showing and telling, he liberated the theory of knowledge, which, in the West, had been blocked for thousands of years. It's not his fault that epistemologists are slow to budge.

But Wittgenstein added: "What can be said at all, can be said clearly."

So let us try to be clear. What can be spoken of, can be told. But to be spoken of, it must be named; and to name it, the speaker must distinguish it from self. One cannot name what one does not know.

Hence the problem of reference, a problem that does not go away, even if one comes to see that language is interaction. In addition, there is the problem of reflection, and this does not go away either.

Here is an illustration: If you want your child Sue to come into the garden, you can pick her up and carry her there. That is interaction, and it will be successful (provided Sue is light enough to carry), but it's not "language".

However, you can also raise your sweetest voice and call: "Darling, would you come into the garden!" That, too, is interaction, but doesn't always work. If it is successful, this may be due to one of three things:

1) a history of calls and reinforcements that has conditioned Sue to go to daddy at the stimulus "Darling", much as a well-trained spaniel comes when called;

2) a history of interactions that has led Sue to parse the sequence "come into the garden!" as one of many possible combinations of signals which, in particular contexts, require a specific motor action;

3) a history of interactions that has led Sue to interpret the utterance as an expression of something that's in daddy's head; something that must itself be interpreted through re-presentation of past experiences with daddy's expression of wishes, with his tendency to say "garden" when he intends "vegetable garden", with the path to it, etc., etc.) and must be evaluated in relation to other possibilities, and which, in this instance, leads to the decision to do as requested.

The way I see it (because that's the way I have made it), this illustrates four types of interaction. Only the last one has the components I require to use the word "language" in the sense I want.

Pushing or pulling others, dragging or carrying them, are no doubt social interactions. As such, they may be modified by all sorts of conventions; but, even if they are, I would not call them "language".

The conditioned response springs from a link the experimenter has established, a link between a sensory experience and a motor action. Even if the stimulus is a "word", because the stimulator (and others) consider it thus, I would not call the interaction "language".

The complex utterance that requires parsing in a context, is "linguistic" in just that respect. Yet, because the outcome of the parsing is still no more than a fixed connection to a sensory-motor pattern, a trigger for a specific way of acting, I would still not call it "language" in the full sense of the term.

Only in the last instance, where the utterance calls forth re-presentations, the replay of past experiences in the receiver's mind, only in that case is the interaction truly different from all other forms of social interaction, and the difference is an exclusive characteristic of "language".

The crucial difference, for me, is this: Whatever is called forth by the piece of language, the items it refers to, are items that have been abstracted from experience. They may, but need not, have any immediate link with sensory-motor experience that is going on, nor any link with present or future manifest behavior. Yet, what is said or heard is not without effect. But the effect is on the language users' acts of re-presentation.

Another illustration. Assume I say: "There's a picture in the Louvre in Paris, a picture of a woman who is famous for her smile." You have immediate access to a past experience of yours, or several maybe, and you can visualize the Mona Lisa (even if, for the moment, you cannot recall her name).

My utterance (written, in this case) is not connected to a specific chain of action of mine nor with some manifest behavior I might expect of you. I used the sentence as an example to show the effect of language on the flow of your re-presentations.

The real power of language is this power to call forth re-presentations of past experience or what the language users have abstracted from it; and what one abstracts from one's experience is "knowledge".

This way of seeing "language" does several things. It makes clear that "to understand" is to be able to fit (more or less satisfactorily) re-presented abstracts of one's own experience to another's words that one hears or reads. If the composition one ends up with seems contradictory, one feels one has not understood, or that the other is in some way out of order.

Understanding language, therefore, requires continuous checking and evaluation of the re-presentations the other's words call forth. And this, at once, raises a question: Who is that observer, that entity that looks at and evaluates its own "knowledge"?

So we come back to the beginning.

I know that I know, and I may know what I know, but not how I know nor who, exactly, it is who does the knowing.

We have no qualms about calling that entity "I" or "myself". But when we call on it, in our tentative investigations of knowing, some stop us at once and say: "Ha, ha! You're introducing a homunculus!"

That used to embarrass me, and I took a long time to think of simply asking back "Why not?" and "Who, in you, makes up your mind to question what I'm saying?"

If something is to be spoken of, it must be named; and in order to name it, the speaker must distinguish it from self. That, of course, is what I do when I speak of "myself" – I treat myself as an "other", as an item that I can observe, an item that is no longer the one that does the observing.

The secret thrives and remains untold. But every now and then a shadow of what it may be shows itself in silence.

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Preprint version of 12 Mar 2006