THE LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

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1 Background: Idealism and Realism

Consider the following picture:

Thought | Reality

This is one that has dominated modern (i.e., post-Cartesian) philosophy. On the one hand, one has the mind, something capable of thinking, perceiving, knowing; on the other, one has the world that it thinks about, perceives and knows. For the world, here, I mean the material world: the world of chairs and tables, trees and stars, people and their practices, societies and their dynamics. Once the duality is posed like this, the question immediately arises as to the relationship between the two.[1]

There are essentially two positions on this question. (Or at least, positions of two kinds have commonly been espoused.) The first is *realism*. According to this, material reality exists and is what it is, independently of thought. Of course, people act in the world, and so things can come into existence as the result of thought. For example, someone can decide to make a chair, and then make it. But this is not the kind of dependence at issue here. When something, such as the chair, exists, its existence does not depend on its being the object of thought processes; similarly, the properties it has, it has independently of people being aware of it in any way. The great realists of modern philosophy include Locke and Marx.

On the other side of the fence, we have *idealism*. Idealists hold, by contrast, that reality depends in an essential way on the mind's cognitive grasp of it. One may distinguish

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[1] The question does not seem to be a prominent one in Ancient and Medieval philosophy, though it certainly makes occasional appearances. Why it assumed such dominance when it did, is itself an interesting question.

two kinds of idealism. The first is to the effect that things do not exist unless they are being perceived - or, at least, thought about. This view is associated with Berkeley. A more moderate, and more plausible, kind of idealism holds that though things may exist independently of our cognition, their *natures* do not. That is, things have the properties they do, in virtue of, and only in virtue of, the way that we cognise them. The great idealists of this kind include Kant and Hegel.

Kant's views will play an important role in what follows, so let us look at them in a little more detail. For a start, Kant distinguished between the ordinary material world (phenomena) and the world as it is in itself (noumena). About the latter, he was not an idealist. In fact, he thought that one could literally say nothing intelligible about it at all. It was for the world of phenomena that he was an idealist. According to Kant, the objects and events of the material world are formed by the imposition of certain concepts of mind on our "raw sensations" (intuitions, as Kant puts it). The concepts are of two kinds: the forms of intuition, space and time, and the categories of the understanding, such as substance and causation. These categories constitute the objects of experience.

2 Linguistic Idealism

The problematic I have just described has also played an important role in the 20th Century, though it has undergone a small metamorphosis. This century has preferred to talk, not in terms of the mind, or thought, but in terms of the theories, conceptual schemas or linguistic structures it employs - or on some accounts, which constitute it. The issue is exactly the same, however: is reality independent of these things, or not? Some, like the early Wittgenstein, have been realists, holding that the world and its nature are independent of propositions about it. Others, like Kuhn, have held that the world is constituted by our theories (or paradigms, in his words). Or yet others, like Dummett, have held that it is constituted by our verification procedures grounding linguistic meaning.

It is one version of this twentieth-century idealism that I want to focus on in particular for the rest of this lecture. This is the view that reality is constructed, in some sense, by language; or as it is sometimes put, by grammar, discourse, or the text. Rorty calls people who espouse such a view 'textualists', and notes their similarly with the idealists of previous generations.[2] Most of the textualists that Rorty cites are literary critics, rather than philosophers. But one of the philosophers he cites is Foucault.[3] In the *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault says:[4]

> ...in the nineteenth century, psychiatric discourse is characterised not by privi-
> leged objects, but by the way it *forms objects* that are in fact highly dispersed.
> This formation is made possible by a group of relations established between au-
> thorities of emergence, delimitation and specification. One might say, then, that
> a discursive formation is defined (as far as its objects are concerned at least) if
> one can establish such a group; if one can show how any particular object of

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[2]Rorty (1982), p. 139f.

[3]Another is Derrida. Derrida is certainly prone to make remarks that may be interpreted in the appropriate way, e.g., that there is nothing "beyond the text". Knowing what, if anything, Derrida means by his gnomic utterances is always a problem. However, I am not inclined to read him as a linguistic constructionalist. I see his remarks as having to do more with the nature of (linguistic) meaning than with that of reality.

[4]Foucault (1972), p. 44. The italics are mine.

discourse finds in it its place and law of emergence; if one can show that it may give birth simultaneously or successively to mutually exclusive objects without having to modify itself.

Discourse, then, creates objects. It might be thought that Foucault is making the point only about objects of psychiatry; but as the context makes plain, the point here is meant to be a quite general one. As one very respectable commentator on Foucault, Hayden White, puts it:[5]

> ...Foucault denies that there is any 'reality' which precedes discourse and reveals its face to a prediscursive 'perception' ... Until discourse arises against the silence of mere existence or within the 'murmur' of a pre-verbal 'agitation of things', there is no distinction between signifier and signified, subject and object, sign and meaning. Or rather, these distinctions are the products of the discursive 'event'.

The only objects are the objects of a discourse, and these are constituted by the discourse itself.

What, exactly, this view amounts to, we will come to in a moment. But let us note, first, a corollary of the view. This is a relativism about truth. What is true about some issue is what correctly describes that reality. This is not a profound point; just a simple truism. But if reality is defined by a discourse, language, or wot not, then what is true will vary from discourse to discourse (language to language, etc.). In particular, what is true relative to one discourse may well be false relative to another.

One needs to distinguish this kind of relativism from another kind. According to this, what is *held to be true* varies between one group of language users - subscribers to one discourse, etc. - and another. Such a view is banal; and could be denied only by someone who had no knowledge of cultures at other times and places. The relativism we are talking about here is far from banal. It has nothing to do with what is believed to be true, but with what is actually true, itself. Nor is it entailed by the banal form. That the sun goes around the earth was certainly held to be true by people who subscribed to a pre-Copernican discourse; it was not so held by people, later, who subscribed to a Galilean one. But between Copernicus and Galileo the sun and the earth did not change places.

One should note, also, that idealism, as such, is not committed to relativism about truth. This is because, though one may hold that the nature of reality is defined by our mental categories, one may suppose these categories - and so the reality they define, and the truth about it - to be unique. This was exactly Kant's view. By contrast, the claim that people's languages, discourses, etc., are unique is *manifestly* false. Thus, given linguistic idealism, their variation must give rise to *multiple realities*, and hence to the relativity of truth.

Thus idealism may or may not be relativistic, but linguistic constructionalism certainly is. Realism, by contrast, always gives rise to an absolutism about truth. There is a unique reality, independent of thought, conceptual schemas or discourses. And *the* truth is that which correctly describes it. How one is to determine this truth, or whether one can always - or ever - do so, is another matter. There is, at least, such a thing.[6]

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[5] White (1979), pp. 85-6.

[6] Note that not all twentieth century relativists are linguistic constructionalists. Rorty, for example, is certainly a relativist, but would prefer to ditch language games about "reality" altogether.

3 The Categories of Discourse

Let us now look at linguistic idealism in more detail. The view is that reality is a construction of our language, discourse, etc. But how, exactly, are we to understand this? As with old-fashioned idealism, we can understand the view in two ways. One has to do with the existence of reality; the other with its nature. On the first way, something comes into existence when, and only when, it is named. This is the linguistic analogue of Berkeley's idealism, that something exists only when it is perceived. Such a view is unlikely to appeal, however. No sane person thinks that the invention of the name 'tree', or some historical equivalent, brought trees into existence: trees have been around a lot longer than language.

The second way of interpreting the claim is more plausible, and is the one espoused by most linguistic constructionlists. According to this view, it is not the existence of a reality that is due to language, but its nature. On this view, there is a "something out there"; but what it is depends on the language we use to describe it. This is a linguistic analogue of Kant's idealism. Reality is constituted by the imposition of, not the categories of mind, but the categories of discourse, on a prediscursive and indeterminate something, 'the silence of mere existence' as Hayden White put it above.

Foucault himself, expresses this view by saying that discourse provides a 'grid of specification',[7] which 'divides up the general plane of things'.[8] Another structuralist/post-structuralist who holds this view is Lacan - at least according to some commentators. One puts his view this way:[9]

> ...the Real is the primordial chaos upon which language operates: 'It is the world of words that creates the world of things - the things originally confused in the *hic et nunc* of the all in the process of coming-into-being (*Ecrits*); the Real is given its structure by the human power to name.

In virtue of the prevalence of this view amongst structuralists and post-structuralists, one might have expected to find the view in Saussure. I do not think that this is, in fact, the case.[10] One certainly finds a view that appears to be similar in some other linguists, though. Writing in 1941, the American linguist Benjamin Whorf wrote:[11]

> ...segmentation of nature is an aspect of grammar - one as yet little studied by grammarians. We cut up and organize the spread and flow of events as we do, largely because, through our mother tongue, we are parties to an agreement to do so, not because nature itself is segmented in exactly that way for all to see. Languages differ not only in how they build their sentences but also in how they break down nature to secure the elements to put in those sentences.

In all these views, then, reality is formed by the imposition of linguistic categories on a pre-linguistic substrate: the general plane of things (Foucault); the Real (Lacan); the spread and flow of events (Whorf).

The point to note - and this is crucial - is that the substrate has what properties it has *only* because of the categories that are imposed on it. It can have no *intrinsic*, that

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[7] *Op. cit.*, p. 42

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 116.

[9] Bowie (1979), p. 133.

[10] Though his writings might well encourage the view, since they focus on the signifier (the word) and the signified (the thought). All mention of a corresponding reality is absent.

[11] Whorf (1956), p. 240.

is, language-independent, properties. If it did, then there would be a prelinguistic reality with a determinate nature and properties. There would therefore be a reality that is *not* linguistically constructed.

4 The Structure of Language

So much for the view itself. Why should one subscribe to it? As I have observed, it is a 20th Century version of Kant's idealism. Kant supported his idealism by arguing that it was the only way to explain the existence of synthetic *a priori* knowledge, that is, knowledge we have about the world, but which does not seem to be inferred from experience - such as that every event has a cause. We can know it because it is part of the way that mind constitutes reality.

Modern linguistic idealism cannot be supported in the same way. The existence of synthetic *a priori* knowledge has undergone a battering since Kant, and few would now subscribe to it. Whether there are other reasons for linguistic idealism, I will leave for others to argue about. For the rest of this lecture I will argue that the view cannot be right. There are very telling arguments against it.

The first is as follows. For the linguistic idealist, the structure of the world is due to the imposition of the structure of language on a substratum. All well and good, but where does the structure of language come from? Language is a material practice, and so part of the material world. Hence, its structure is determined by...the structure of language imposed on the substratum. But this cannot be. The structure of language was what was to be accounted for; it cannot be invoked to explain. We therefore have a vicious regress.[12]

Compare this situation with Kant's. For him, the structure of the world is due to the imposition of the structure of the mind. What accounts for the structure of the mind? According to Kant, the mind is a noumenal entity outside the world, and its structure is *sui generis*. Whatever one is to make of this answer, note that because the mind is located outside the material order, and not inside it, the regress does not arise.

The only way, it seems to me, for the linguistic idealist to avoid the vicious regress is to locate language and its structure outside the material realm, and so avoid the regress as Kant does. I doubt that this would appeal to many exponents of linguistic idealism: it would seem an utter mystification of language. But it might just. Even if this move worked, though, linguistic idealism is in trouble for two other reasons. Both of these have to do with the viability of the claim that there is a substratum with no intrinsic properties.

5 The Propertyless Substratum

The first point about this claim is that it is self-refuting. The situation is one that beset both Plato and Aristotle a long time ago. Neither of these was a linguistic constructionalist, or even an idealist in the sense I have described. However, both held a view to the effect that reality is produced by the imposition of some kind of form on a substrate. For Plato in the *Timaeus*, this substrate was a receptacle (*khora*); for Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*, it was prime matter. They both argued that this substrate, being the bearer of all properties,

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[12]This argument was pointed out to me by Roger Lamb.

could have no properties in itself. But in saying this, they contradicted themselves. For in so saying, they were saying exactly what the substrate was like in itself, viz., propertyless.[13]

Exactly the same is true of linguistic constructionalism. For it, too, holds that the substrate, in itself, has no properties. But this is exactly to say how it is in itself, viz., propertyless, and so to ascribe it an intrinsic property. The view is self-refuting, therefore, for exactly the same reasons.

There is a possible line of reply here. This is to claim that the property of being intrinsically propertyless is not itself an intrinsic property, but one that the substrate has only in virtue of the imposition of *our* linguistic categories on it. But this reply is itself self-refuting. For then the claim that the substratum is intrinsically propertyless does not have the force that the linguistic constructionalist requires. If the property of possessing no properties is merely one that the substratum has according to *our* linguistic framework, this is quite compatible with its *really* possessing all kinds of properties, and so with realism. If the linguistic idealist wishes to propose a view that is a denial of realism, their claim that the substratum has no intrinsic properties must be a claim about what it is like intrinsically. But in that case, it is self-refuting, as we have seen.

The second objection is that the substratum cannot, in any case, be propertyless, or it could not do what is required of it. Either the substratum is not homogeneous, but is differentiated in some way, in which case it has intrinsic features. Or the application of categories to it can only be arbitrary. But this second possibility cannot be right, for two reasons. First, if the application of a category were absolutely arbitrary, there could be no agreement, even amongst users of the same language, as to whether or not to apply it. Hence communication would cease, even between speakers of the same language - which it does not. Secondly, if an individual can apply a word quite arbitrarily, then it has no meaning whatsoever. If I can apply the word 'strumpt' to a situation whenever I feel like it, without objective constraint, then it has no content at all.[14]

For two reasons, then, the possession by the substrate of intrinsic properties is a necessary condition for the fact that we communicate in a language with meaning. We therefore have a transcendental argument (in Kant's sense) against linguistic constructionalism.

6   Conclusion

It is important to keep the results of the preceding sections in perspective. They do not show that our *conception* of reality is independent of language; that is certainly not the case. Nor do they even provide a general refutation of idealism. All they show is that a certain version of idealism, linguistic constructionalism, is untenable. It does seem to me, however, that the last argument we looked at may be formulated in a more general way. A precondition for the possibility of language, thought, or any other "system of representations", is the intrinsically differentiated nature of a prerepresentational reality to which the system is applied. If this is right, then we have an argument, not just against linguistic constructionalism, but for realism itself. Such an argument would require careful spelling out and defence. But that is an enterprise for another occasion.

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[13]For further references and discussion, see Priest (1995), ch. 1.

[14]The point is much elaborated by Wittgenstein in the sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* dealing with the private language argument.

References

[1] Bowie, M. (1979) 'Jacques Lacan', *Structuralism and Since: from Levi-Strauss to Derrida*, J. Sturrock (ed.), Oxford University Press

[2] Foucault, M. (1972) *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Pantheon Books, Random House

[3] Priest, G. (1995) *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, Cambridge University Press

[4] Rorty, R. (1982) *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Harvester Press

[5] White, H. (1979) 'Michael Foucaualt', *Structuralism and Since: from Levi-Strauss to Derrida*, J. Sturrock (ed.), Oxford University Press

[6] Whorf, B. (1956) *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writing of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, J. B. Carroll (ed.), MIT Press