Philosophy of Language // Spring 2019

Handout 16

Meaning naturalised: Millikan

Outline of the theory. Millikan begins by giving a brief sketch of her view. How to distinguish between a functioning heart and a malformed heart? One pumps blood, the other does not. Moreover, there are artificial devices that pump blood, but would still not be called 'heart'. We think of hearts as a biological category distinguished by its *proper function*. Every member of that category has evolved, or was designed, to perform a particular function. 17

Linguistic items are similarly best described as biological categories. Their function is, roughly, getting the reality right. The function of sentences and beliefs is to be true. The function of concepts is to be clear and unambiguous. 17

A further distinction is between direct and derived proper functions. Only the entities that are members of reproductive families have direct proper functions. This requires, in turn, a concept of reproduction. 18

Reproductions and functions. Intuitively, reproductions can be thought as copies of a certain item. This includes three ideas. First, the original and the replica should have properties in common. Second, these properties are not shared by chance. There must be a law explaining why they are shared. Three, the dependence between the original and the replica is causal. The third feature may be illustrated by looking at the case of mass-produced items. These items are not replicas of one another. Instead, they are replicas of a prototype on which the production line is built. 19, 20 21

A further notion is that of first-order reproductively established family. This is best explained by contrasting it with 'natural' and 'conventional$_1$'. A behavioural pattern is natural, or non-arbitrary, when it is explained *not* through its antecedent occurrences in a population. We act naturally when our behaviour is explained by our own characteristics, rather than by reference to the similar behaviour of others. On the other hand, our behaviour is conventional$_1$ when it is created by an agreement, yet is not widespread—that is, is not reproduced, and perhaps not even meant to be reproduced. So, members of a first-order reproductively established family are all non-natural and also intended to be reproduced in a group (or as a matter of fact explained by this reproduction). 23 24

The notion of a higher-order reproductive family covers the cases where items are not replicas of each other, but are rather replicas of a shared original. For example, our English utterances here are members of a higher-order family, but not of a first-order family. 24

In general, an object may have all sorts of functions and uses. Yet, there is one special function that it has *as* a member of a reproductive family. A certain trait, that is, can serve as a reason, an explanation, why this and not another object (with a different behaviour) was reproduced. This is the direct proper function of the object. 27

Application to language. Linguistic devices appear to constitute a reproductive family. When children or foreigners learn a language, they reproduce syntactic and phonetic forms they have encountered among native speakers. But if they constitute such families, should those have any functions associated with them? It seems that they should. For in the absence of any function, why would people even bother to engage in a conversation? There must be what Millikan calls a 'stabilizing proper function'—that is, a function responsible for the 'standard' responses of the speakers. 29 30

Linguistic types. How do we classify word tokens, these strings of shapes and noises? Never according to the similarities of their shapes and noises. Sometimes the grouping has to do with their historical origins (the child writing a French word '*il*'). More often, we observe the similarities in the ways of their use—in the ways they are put to use. That is, they are grouped according to their functions. But which functions? 72

One idea is to say that these functions are fixed here and now, by the present speakers. This would, roughly, mean that there is a function in virtue of which these tokens have been reproduced repeatedly in the past. And in accordance with what was said before, these functions

must serve as a stabilizator, a center of gravity, to which the uses of a particular type must revert after a possible deviation.

So it is clear that the notion of a stabilizing function is key to explicating the concept of semantic meaning. Whatever possible deviations might occur, there *remains* a layer of meaning invariant under these different uses.

YSB