

BENJAMIN HUMPHREY SMART AND JOHN STUART MILL: LOGIC AND PARTS OF SPEECH

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An interest in Benjamin Humphrey Smart may be prompted to an attentive reader by a footnote in Mill's *Logic*, commenting on this significant appreciation of Locke's treatment of language: "Nor is anything wanting to render the third book of Locke's *Essay* a nearly unexceptionable treatise on the connotation of names, except to free its language from the assumption of what are called Abstract Ideas, which unfortunately is involved in the phraseology, though not necessarily connected with the thoughts contained in that immortal Third Book" (L,115). In the explanatory footnote, Mill refers to Smart with more than simple approbation: "The always acute and often profound author of *An Outline of Sematology* (Mr.B.H.Smart) justly says, 'Locke will be much more intelligible, if, in the majority of places, we substitute 'the knowledge of' for what he calls 'the Idea of'' (p.10). Among the many criticisms on Locke's use of the word Idea, this is the one which, as it appears to me, most nearly hits the mark; and I quote it for the additional reason that it precisely expresses the point of difference respecting the import of Propositions, between my view and what I have spoken of as the Conceptualist view of them. Where a conceptualist says that a name or a proposition expresses our Idea of a thing, I should generally say (instead of our Idea) our Knowledge, or Belief, concerning the thing itself" (L,115n). So, according to Mill, Locke's conceptualism can be amended by heeding Smart's advice, that is by substituting for the notion 'the idea of' the notion 'the knowledge of'. At first, the notion 'the knowledge of' may appear quite vague and it is necessary to appeal directly to Smart, in order to clarify what exactly he means by this expression.

But, first of all, who is Smart? The compiler of the *Dictionary of National Biography* is not very free with his information. Smart's date of birth is actually reported as uncertain (1786?) and all we learn about him is that he "employed himself in teaching elocution". As "a practical teacher of grammar and its kindred branches", as he too defines himself, he published several manuals of elocution, grammar, logic, and rhetoric; however, he also felt the need "to supply a more correct theory of language" than he "found generally prevalent" (AS,445). In doing so, he realized that "the position" he "had taken for the purpose of examining language, was one which, with more complex survey, would bring the whole subject of metaphysics under view" (AS,446). A correct theory of language could therefore contribute to "the progress of English metaphysical philosophy", that which was "begun by Locke and carried on by others, but chiefly by Horne Tooke" (LW,5). But what is metaphysics, according to Smart, and what is to be done towards "completing what Locke and Horne Tooke left imperfect"? (LW,10)

Metaphysics is the discipline which deals with "things beyond natural things" (OS,2n). Natural things are those "which exist distinctly from our notions of them, or that we believe or imagine so to exist" (AS,485-6) and "therefore include the mind itself" (OS,1n). Objects of metaphysics, indeed "the sole subjects of that branch of learning called metaphysics", are, on the other hand, our "notions", that is "the knowledge we have of things" (AS,503). Now, "the only legitimate purpose that metaphysics can have" (TL,10) is that established by Locke, and namely "to enquire into the Original, Certainty, and Extent of humane Knowledge" (E,43). However, Locke committed some serious errors. In the first place, he justly ascribes the origin of our knowledge to sensation, but is wrong in considering sensations as the "materials" (AS,505) from which our notions or knowledge "are formed" (TL,22). Therefore, "sensationalists" (ML,110), among whom Smart recalls "the French ideologists" and, in England, James Mill, are all wrong in assuming "implicitly as a fundamental principle" this "egregious error, which perhaps" in Locke "was rather in mode of speaking than in thought" (AS,506). Secondly, we can charge Locke with an "ignorance of the true relation that language bears to thought" (TL,25). "This relation is almost uniformly misconceived" (AS,479), for "the universal notion is, that language represents thought with a perfect correspondence of part to part, and a correspondence of operations in joining the parts" (TL,1). Locke also takes "for granted" the "same kind of correspondence" and "considers that all nouns in a proposition are put forward as signs of ideas that are the mental elements of the proposition" (TL,2). A third error that "neither Locke nor Horne Tooke had exposed" consisted in considering "the distinction to be sound which affirms *three* operations of the mind to be concerned in argument, and proper to be treated severally in logic" (LW,8).

Let us see briefly, and in turn, how Smart proposes to correct these errors. The first can be avoided by a sound theory of perception, such as Smart derives "from different quarters" (TL,22), generalizing Berkeley's observations on visual perception, on the one hand, and above all, on the other, availing himself of "the clear light which the Scotch philosophers have let in by the demolition of the ancient theories of perception" (AS,506). Thus, while a sensationalist such as James Mill "lays it down as a fact that to be in pain and to be conscious of pain, is one and the same thing" (ML,110n), Smart maintains exactly the opposite, namely that "a sensation is one thing, and the knowledge we have of it, and have, through it, of a something external, is quite another thing" (TL,23). Sensation and knowledge are therefore quite distinct: "sensation by itself is nothing more than an effect on the animal frame" (TL,14), while knowledge "is properly ascribable" (TL,23) to a "higher function" (TL,15); it "consists in being aware of relations", since "one thing cannot be known without the contradistinction of another" (LW,14), that is "distinctly from, and therefore relatively to another" (LW,13). Hence knowledge results from an act of the intellect "in which we are aware of a relation between two things" (M,I.161-2), or rather of a "virtual syllogism" (TL,166), "these things being what in all cases we are entitled to call premises, and the knowledge - the being aware of the relation - what we are entitled to call the conclusion" (M,I.162). Knowledge, which "is not linked originally to sensation" (LW,13), having once been received" (TL,166) as the result of an intellection, "remains as knowledge permanently accompanying sensation" (TL,64) - and this is what is properly called "perception" (TL,65). For this reason, "human perception" (TL,166), which actually depends on a "rational process" (M,I.28), has erroneously been considered, from "the days of Aristotle" to "those of Locke and Horne Tooke" (TL,166-7), as "the same as brute perception" (TL,166), that is "instinctive" and coincident with sensation (M,I.27).

"Every perception" is "individual and particular" knowledge (OS,8-9) of given objects in given circumstances. Particular are also our "conceptions" (TL,

65) - a term already used, in the same sense, by Dugald Stewart - that is knowledge associated to the sensations recalled to the mind by imagination and memory. These alone are properly to be called ideas. On the contrary, all those which Locke calls ideas, simple or complex, are not particular knowledge, but are indeed abstract notions. "The knowledge, for instance, which we have of red... transcends, or abstracts from, our actual perception... and from any idea, that is, image... which we distinctly form" (ML, 110). Now, "with out representative signs of some kind we would never abstract or generalize" (PL, 2n). Notions or abstract knowledge cannot exist by themselves, independently of their signs. It is only by means of signs that they can be "preserved" (TL, 52) for "speculative use" (AS, 508). They are "things metaphysical" (AS, 499) or "metaphysical existences" (TL, 51-2), and are not "constitutive" parts of thought, but merely "suggest" it (TL, 52). In short, we can say that abstract notions are nothing but the signification of words. It is therefore to knowledge of this kind, that is to the meaning of words, that we have to refer whenever Locke speaks of 'ideas'; moreover, meanings are to be seen as instructions to think correctly and soundly. This leads us to Smart's criticism of the second error he imputes to Locke.

In his *Essay*, Locke openly admitted having overlooked the study of language: "when I first began this Discourse of the Understanding, and a good while after, I had not the least Thought, that any Consideration of Words was at all necessary to it" (E, 488). It was Horne Tooke, who, a century later, fully appreciated the importance of words and "did question" (TL, 3) the notion, "taken for granted by Locke" (TL, 2), "that the parts of speech have their origin in the mind independently of the outwards signs, when, in truth, they are nothing more than parts in the structure of language" (OS, 38). Horne Tooke maintained as a basic principle, that "many words are merely abbreviations employed for dispatch and are the signs of other words" (DP, 14). He thus "traced all the parts of speech up to two, namely noun and verb" and showed that "the remaining parts are only one or the other of these in disguise" (TL, 4); but "he broke down at the difference between these two, and left his work imperfect" (LW, 7), because "he could not establish, what indeed is contrary to truth, that verbs grew out of nouns, and not nouns out of verbs" (TL, 5). As a matter of fact, he thought that "the first invented elements of speech were nouns", and that nouns were "names for impressions" received by the mind (OS, 63n). Hence he did not succeed in freeing himself completely from that "universal delusion" (TL, 131) concerning the relation of language to thought, so clearly exposed by Dugald Stewart: "in reading the enunciation of a proposition, we are apt to fancy, that for every word contained in it, there is an idea presented to the understanding; from the combination and comparison of which ideas, results that act of the mind called judgement. So different is all this from fact, that our words, when examined separately, are often as completely insignificant as the letters of which they are composed, deriving their meaning solely from the connection or relation in which they stand to others" (PE, 154-5). In accordance with these fundamental insights, Smart was able to develop a purely functionalistic account of parts of speech, deriving them all from a supposed original "indivisible expression" (LW, 13), the "instinctive cry", which is the "sign suggested directly by nature" (OS, 7) of "the whole thought" (OS, 45) which is conveyed by an "artificially compounded" expression (OS, 8) of any length and complexity.

The dichotomic generative procedure expounded by Smart is very interesting; and not only because of his use of revertible tree-diagrams (LW, 21-2; TL, 157-9; AS, 466). Quite remarkably, the grammatical features of the several parts of speech can only be accounted for when, by successive transformations, a complete system of grammatical categories is fully developed: the "primary division" (LW, 20n) of "the original element of speech" (OS, 63n) merely produces

a sort of deep structure components, which "may still be called nominative and verb" only by analogy (LW,19). Here, though, the semantic aspects are most relevant. According to Smart, "the meaning of a phrase or sentence is not the aggregate of the several meanings of the parts which construct it" (TL,139), but is "always one and incomplex" (LW,21). The several words of a sentence, "as parts of that sentence, are not by themselves significant" (OS,55); on the contrary, "each part resigns its separate meaning the moment it enters into union with the other parts" in order to form the "whole expression" (TL,137). An artificially "constructed expression used in place of the exclamation" (LW,18) "first furnished by nature" (LW,17) is indeed to be regarded as a *token-sentence* or expression, "used for a particular communication" (OS,126), in order to convey an "actual thought" (OS,16), or particular "state of intellect" (TL,48), referring to a given object, either concrete or abstract, under given circumstances. Separate words, on the other hand, are to be seen as "abstract parts of speech" (TL,179), or *type-expressions*: they do not signify "parts" (TL,163) of "particular intellections" (AS,481), but only express "notions" (OS,10), or abstract "knowledge" held by the understanding "apart from" any given occasion of thought (TL,179). A "knowledge", then, or what is more "properly called a notion" (OS,13), is given a purely semantic status and constitutes the "abstract signification" (AS,478) of words.

Two different components can be distinguished in the "separate meaning" (OS,13) of type-expressions, a *categorical* one, related to form, and a *notional* one, related to content. Smart lays down proper principles of categorical analysis, such as the following: "a word is this or that part of speech only from the office it fulfils in making up a sentence. From this principle it follows, that a word is liable to lose its characteristic difference as often as it changes the nature of its relation to other words in a sentence; and it also follows, that every now and then a word may be used in some capacity which makes it difficult to be assigned to any of the received classes of words" (OS,59). In Smart's view, principles of this kind "promise much assistance in laying the foundation for any useful system of studying metaphysics", a discipline to which is assigned "the purpose of teaching the nature of the notions denoted by lingual signs" (AS,484). The similarity of these claims with Gilbert Ryle's well-known contention, that "to enquire and even say 'what it really means to say so and so' is 'what philosophical analysis is' and 'the sole and whole function of philosophy'" (CP,II,61), hardly needs to be insisted upon. In its turn, the *notional* component of the "separate meaning" of words, the abstract "knowledge" they express, is quite independent of their categorical nature. "For instance", says Smart, "the following words all express the same notion: Add, Addition, Additional, Additionally, With (the imperative of the Saxon verb *þiðan* to join), And (the imperative of the Saxon verb *ananað* to add)" (OS,40). What Smart calls "the knowledge of what it is to be a man" (TL,180), and Locke "the abstract Idea the name Man stands for" or "the Essence of a Man" (E,415), simply is, according to Mill, "the whole of the attributes connoted by the word" (L,111): significantly enough, Mill maintains that the distinction between connotative adjectives and names "is rather grammatical than logical", because "there is no difference of meaning" (L,26).

Naturally, the "double force" Smart distinguishes in words, namely their "united force", by which they signify an "actual thought", and their "separate force", by which they refer to "knowledge" (OS,12,14), is not to be confused with the two components, categorical and notional, of the "abstract signification" (AS,478) of words. Abstract signification concerns the "significant parts" (OS,7) of a "completed" (TL,137) artificial expression. However, according to Smart, "every single word" or phrase can, "if not in form, yet virtually", be "always a sentence" (AS,480), or a "completed expression" (OS,251), that is to say an expression which is substituted for the "natural cry" (OS,8)

to signify a particular thought, or the conceiving of an object, particular and determinate, in given relations and circumstances; therefore, "we can take away the abstract meaning of words" (the meaning they have as type-expressions) and use them as "particular expressions or sentences" (as token-expressions) to signify "particular intellections" (AS, 481), such as "would a natural ejaculation arising out of the occasion", used in their place (OS, 116). On the other hand, as every word or phrase "is virtually a sentence" (AS, 483), in like manner "every sentence which does not express the full communication intended, but... becomes a clause of a larger sentence, is precisely of the nature of any single word making part of a sentence" (OS, 125). This means that all parts of speech and all expressions "however long and complex" can signify, according to their use, either a thought - that is a particular state of intellect "one and indivisible" (TL, 55), or a notion - that is abstract knowledge "deposited in the mind" (OS, 120). Resorting to Husserl's semantic concepts (cfr. LU, II, 1, 44), we might say that the same expression, if used as a "completed expression", conveys its *erfüllende Bedeutung*, if taken abstractly as a part of a more complex expression, simply conveys its *intendierende Bedeutung*.

The preceding remarks make it possible to see why Smart tries to substitute for the three "operations of the mind", which are commonly said to be "necessary" in logic, "viz. Perception or Simple Apprehension, Judgment, and Reasoning" (OS, 109), that single "process or act of reasoning" (OS, 138), which he calls the "natural" (LW, 8), "informal", or "virtual syllogism" (TL, 191). In his terms, "logic is the right use of words" (OS, 87), "as the medium for reaching further knowledge" (OS, 175). The moment it is reached, all knowledge is entertained as an "actual thought", which can be signified by any kind of expression - a single word, a sentence, or a period - taken as "complete" (TL, 163). The form of the expression we might choose does not modify the way our knowledge is obtained "at the bidding of its appropriate occasion"; knowledge "is, in every case, nothing more, nor less, nor other, than the being aware of a relation" (AS, 469), and is always acquired by means of a "virtual syllogism, of which the two things whose relation is perceived, are the premises, and the knowledge of their relation, the conclusion" (TL, 30). Therefore, taken as complete, a "word or phrase" (OS, 112), or any other expression, all "denote conclusions arising out of a rational process" (OS, 97); the content they express is always "an inference" (OS, 112) and does not admit of separate treatments in logic.

It is because man receives his knowledge "by means of premises which suggest it" (LW, 17) that "he invents language". Man "abstracts his knowledge from the thing known, and embodies it in a sign"; then, "with the signs of his abstract knowledge", joined as the signs of certain premises, "he forms the speech which takes the place of the natural exclamation that the occasion would otherwise prompt, the signs losing their abstraction in the more particular meaning which they thus unite to express" (M, I, 197). Thus "words (or signs equivalent to words)", can properly serve "as the media for reaching new conclusions" (OS, 94). But language also "enables us to reason with parts of speech in their abstract state, so as to dispense with all attention to real things" (TL, 187). This is exactly what "Aristotelian" (OS, 142) or "formal logic" does, "rendering thought mischievously artificial", by putting "signs for things", and making its conclusions depend on the agreement or disagreement of "two parts of speech or abstractions", that is "on the form of the reasoning, and not on the knowledge of the things concerning which the reasoning takes place" (TL, 188-9). On the contrary, Smart assigns to logic the "office of investigating truth" (OS, 174) and conceives it as "an art which also employs language instrumentally in reasoning, but so employs it as ever to lose its abstractions as fast as they answer their ends, while it never loses sight of the

things, on and from the knowledge of which, the reasoning takes place" (TL, 189). According to Smart, formal logic is pure "argumentation, or a process with a view to proof" (OS, 176-7), and "proving truth" is the mere rhetorical act of "convincing others of it" (OS, 173).

In his accurate review of Smart's *Sematology*, Mill pays due tribute to the "clear, vigorous, and masculine" thinking of its author (RS, 212a) and expressly acknowledges his agreement with the views expounded on "the nature of the parts of speech", on "the manner in which general terms serve us in the investigation of truth", and against the received opinion "that the meaning of a sentence is the sum of the meanings of the separate words" (RS, 212b). Nevertheless the appealing views of our teacher of elocution, who certainly was an author "of small name" (TL, 195) among his contemporaries, seem to have been far more influential on Mill's thought than he openly declares, and their ascendancy over some of Mill's main contentions, such as the distinction between "the Logic of Consistency" and "the Logic of Truth" (L, 208), would undoubtedly deserve closer investigation.

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