

PLATO, ARISTOTLE, AND BERKELEY
ON THE RELATIONS BETWEEN
LANGUAGE, REALITY, AND PERCEPTION

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There seems to me to be a relationship of mutual dependence between the way in which one views the relations between language, perception, and reality and the way in which one treats the perennial problems of meaning, reference, and universals, among others. I shall restrict myself in this paper to an attempt to comprehend the views of Plato, Aristotle, and Berkeley on the relations between language, perception, and reality, since I think that their views are representative of the main strands of thought on these relations in the history of philosophy.

I.

It is essential to outline Plato's treatment of the so-called false statement problem and one of his arguments in the Theaetetus for the claim that perception is not knowledge. Plato's treatment of the false statement problem is nicely summed up in T.W. Bestor's "Plato on Language and Falsehood."¹ I shall simply recapitulate Bestor's summary, since his interpretation is, as far as I can tell, correct and especially relevant for understanding the views of Plato, Aristotle, and Berkeley on the relations between language, perception, and reality. The false statement problem, as Plato poses it in the Sophist, arises from a failure to distinguish the naming and the stating parts of statements. According to Plato, at least some, and perhaps all words are either names of things or meaningless sounds. For example, if the singular expression "this man" in a statement does not name a particular man, then the expression is meaningless; and if the general expression "wise" in a statement does not name a particular Form, then the

expression is meaningless. Whether such expressions as "a" "the," "and," and "is" are either names or meaningless sounds, in the way in which singular and general expressions are, is not relevant to the false statement problem. This problem arises, not when one regards every individual word as a name, but when one regards statements - or combinations of words - as names, as Plato himself seems to in the Cratylus and the Theaetetus. On this view, a statement, though it is a complex linguistic expression, will, like simple linguistic expressions, be either meaningful if it names something, or a meaningless sound or group of sounds if it does not name anything. Furthermore, like singular and general expressions, a statement will be meaningful if it names the sort of thing that it is suited to name. That is, a statement will be meaningful if it names a state of affairs, or meaningless if it names no state of affairs. But a statement is also true just when it names a state of affairs, or false just when it does not. Therefore, all true statements are meaningful, and all false statements are meaningless.

The false statement problem is solved by recognizing that statements as linguistic units have a function other than the naming function that the lesser linguistic units within statements have. The function peculiar to statements is to state that something is so, or more precisely, to state ~~that~~ something about something. It remains the case in this solution that lesser linguistic units such as singular and general expressions can never be false, but only meaningless, if they

fail to name something. But given that each component linguistic unit of a statement is meaningful or does name something, the truth value of the statement depends on how it performs its stating function. A statement is true if the thing named by its subject term is in fact related to the thing named by its predicate term in just the way in which the statement asserts they are related, and false if the things named are not in fact so related. Bestor presents his extraction of the core of Plato's theory of language, meaning, and truth as follows:

1. A statement is meaningless when it fails to weave names together or weaves them together in a way in which the named things could not possibly be woven together in reality.
2. A statement is meaningful when it weaves names together in a way in which the things named might possibly be woven together in reality.
3. A statement is true when its names are woven together in the way in which the things named are actually in fact woven together.
4. A statement is false when its names are woven together in a way in which the named things do not happen in fact to be woven together.²

If Plato's consideration of the false statement problem in the Sophist poses the problem of the relation between language and reality, his consideration of whether knowledge is perception in the Theaetetus poses the problem of the relation between language and perception. Plato's claim that words are either names or meaningless sounds is more immediately relevant to the latter problem than his claim that statements perform a stating function. The problem of the naming function of words arises

in a discussion of the question of what knowledge is.³

Theaetetus gives as his initial answer to this question several particular kinds of knowledge, among them the individual sciences and arts. He has given as his response a whole variety, but Socrates says that questions of the form "what is x?" ask for one simple thing. If one asks what clay is, it is absurd to list the particular kinds of clay - potter's clay, brick-maker's clay, etc. We use the word "clay" no matter whose clay we call it. But how are we to understand this word, unless we know what the thing is that it names? What clay is, for example, can be defined by naming the elements - earth and moisture (which in turn require their own definitions) - out of which any particular sort of clay is made. In order to determine what a thing is, or what a common word names, one must look for a single characteristic or set of characteristics that embraces the multitude of the particular kinds of that thing. However, if one can find no single formula of this sort, then one cannot determine what the word in question names, and thus for all practical purposes, this word is a meaningless sound.

When Theaetetus defines knowledge as perception, Socrates compares this definition not only with a similar one of Protagoras, but with the view shared by Protagoras, Heraclitus, and Empedocles that all things, and in particular perceived things, are in a constant process of becoming or change. The consequences of this view for the relation between perception and language are brought out in the following statements of Socrates:

. . . and indeed the doctrine is a remarkable one.

It declares that nothing is one thing just by itself,

nor can you rightly call it by some definite name, nor even say it is of any definite sort. On the contrary, if you call it 'large', it will be found to be also small; if 'heavy', to be also light; and so on all through, because nothing is one thing or some thing or of any definite sort. All things we are pleased to say 'are', really are in process of becoming, as a result of movement and change and of blending one with another. We are wrong to speak of them as 'being', for none of them ever is; they are always becoming.⁴

There is some doubt whether this theory of perception and reality represents Plato's own view, given a contrasting theory put forward in the Republic and the Phaedo. In any case, he adopts it in the Theaetetus at least to refute the claim that knowledge is perception, and this theory does not seem to be incompatible with his doctrine that a word must either name a thing or be meaningless. The Protagorean theory of perception and reality renders most common words, such as "table" and "Man", meaningless, since there are no ~~things~~ things (either numerically or specifically self-identical) which these words could be said rightly to name. Whenever we use singular and general expressions in ordinary discourse, we are laboring under the prejudice that they name the things we are talking about, when in fact we can talk about no determinate things at all:

. . . nothing is one thing just by itself, but is always in process of becoming for someone, and being is to be ruled out altogether, though, needless to say, we have been betrayed by habit and inobservance into using the word more than once only just now.⁵

When we use singular and general expressions in ordinary discourse, we purport to bring to a standstill things which, by their very nature, cannot be brought to a standstill. With respect to the particular point under discussion, Theaetetus cannot correctly claim to define knowledge as perception, because knowledge cannot be defined at all. The more general and ironic moral of this discussion is that philosophical insight into the nature of perception and reality ought to issue in a call for a reform of ordinary language, at least to the extent that it is used to speak about the nature of perception and reality.

I now want to sum up the problem of the relations between language, perception, and reality as posed by Plato. The functions of words, at least of singular and general expressions, is to name things, and the function of statements is to state that something is the case. A statement is true if the thing named by its subject term is in fact related to the thing named by its predicate term in just the way in which the statement asserts they are related, and false if the things named are not in fact so related. But for a statement to be meaningful, and thus possibly true or false, its subject and predicate terms must name things. Statements about what we perceive, however, are meaningless - neither true nor false - because there are no determinate "things" perceived which could be named by the subject and predicate terms. Therefore, perception involves neither "intuitive" knowledge, since perceived things both "are" and "are not," nor "propositional" knowledge, since we cannot formulate meaningful statements about perceived things. ⁶

II.

I In order to resolve Plato's problem of the relations between language, perception, and reality, it seems that one could modify either one or both of two poles of the problem. By modifying the "language" pole, one could claim that the function of a word is not to name any one determinate thing, and go on to develop a language adequate to express the ever-changing nature of perceived things. By modifying the "perception" pole, one could claim that perceived things do in some sense remain the same, in such a way that they can be rightly named by words. I think that Berkeley opts for the first alternative and that Aristotle opts for the second alternative. Before I consider these options in detail, however, I want to inquire whether Plato himself offers a solution to the problem. Since he clearly does not abandon his theories of naming and stating, he does not opt for modifying the "language" pole of the problem. On the other hand, he nowhere proposes an alternative to the Protagorean-Heraclitean theory of perception. Perhaps an outline of an alternative can be constructed, in any case, from Plato's views on universals and particulars in the Republic, the Phaedo, and the Sophist.

As we have already seen in the Sophist, a statement is significant and true or false depending on whether and how the things named by its subject and predicate terms are woven together in reality. The things that are either woven or not woven together in reality are, for Plato, the Forms or universals. Thus, the statement that Plato uses in the Sophist, "Theaetetus

walks," asserts a weaving-together of two Forms in reality - the Forms named by "Theaetetus" and "walking." This is not quite correct: although "walking" names a Form, "Theaetetus" seems to name not a Form, but a particular man. If this is the case, then two further problems arise. If the subject term of a statement purports to name a particular thing, as opposed to a Form, and particular things are objects of sense perception,⁷ then how can the subject term in fact name anything? On the other hand, since Forms are precisely the sort of things that can be named,⁸ but are "intellected" rather than perceived,⁹ it seems that the predicate terms of a statement can in fact name something, but not anything that is perceived. In other words, if one takes Plato's theory of universals and particulars seriously, then the subject terms of a statement refers to a thing that cannot be named, while the predicate term refers to a thing that is not perceived.

I see only one way of extricating Plato's theory from these difficulties. Suppose that we perceive a particular man, say Theaetetus, walking. One statement that we could make about what we perceive is "Theaetetus is walking." This statement is equivalent to "this man is walking." "This man is walking" asserts, in turn, that a particular thing participates in two Forms, that of walking, and that of man, that are woven together.¹⁰ The subject term, "this man" ("Theaetetus"), names a particular man or thing perceived only in so far as any particular thing can be said to be "named after" a Form in which it participates.¹¹ Whether the perceivability of the Form named by the predicate term can also be accounted for by the participation relation is still an open question.

III.

My attempt to construct a solution to Plato's problem of the relations between language, reality, and perception would probably seem misguided to him, since the absence of any solution to this problem is just what warrants Plato's claim that knowledge is not perception. Aristotle, however, is genuinely interested in solving this problem. It is necessary to remark parenthetically that Aristotle does not hope to show, by solving Plato's problem, that knowledge can be reduced to perception. For Aristotle, the point of Plato's problem is only that we cannot make meaningful and true or false statements about what we perceive, given certain assumptions about language and perceived reality. Aristotle tries to show how Plato's assumptions about reality in general, and about perceived reality in particular, are mistaken to begin with, and that different assumptions will enable us to make meaningful and true or false statements about what we perceive.

Aristotle's criticism of Plato's theory of reality revolves around the participation relation of particulars to universals. I have shown that there is some difficulty in getting this relation to do the job of enabling statements about perceived things to be meaningful. Take the statement, "this banana is green." On the one hand, for this statement to be meaningful, its subject term, "this banana," and its predicate term, "green," each must name a thing that remains what it is. But since only the Forms remain what they are, it seems that the singular expression, "this banana," which purports to name a particular thing, in fact never names any such thing at all. On the other hand, for the statement to be about perceived things, the things named by the subject term (a singular expression) and the

predicate term (a general expression) must both be perceived, but this seems to be true only of the former sort of thing named, since the Forms named by general expressions are not perceived, but intellected. If Aristotle could show how particular perceived things are of such a nature that they can in fact be named, and could show how general expressions can in fact name perceived things, then Plato's problem might be solved without generating a further Platonic problem.

The first part of Aristotle's solution, that particular things are of such a nature that they can be named, can be derived from his solution to the main problem posed by the participation relation. If "this banana is green" states anything for Plato, it states that a particular thing - this banana - is what it is by participating in two Forms - that of banana and that of green. But this means, on the level of the particular thing, that the thing is just a concatenation of its attributes, and that when one of these changes, say, the banana turns yellow, the particular thing is new. No particular thing has a character of its own allowing it to persist, which is to say, after all, that the Forms remain always the same and that particular things constantly change, or have being only by participation. Aristotle claims that the source of the problem posed by the participation relation - that particular things have no integrity of their own and thus are not namable - is that the participation relation allows for only one sort of predication: the "said of" predication. Another sort of predication, the "said in" predication, is not allowed for by

the participation relation but does permit particular things to remain what they are and thus to be namable. How do these two sorts of predication do the job of reforming the participation relation?

Take our statements, "this banana is green" and "this banana is yellow." If the first statement asserts, in Aristotelian terminology, that green is predicated of a particular banana and the second statement asserts that yellow is predicated of a particular banana, then the speaker could not be talking about the same particular banana in the two statements ("predicated of" or "said of" is a relation holding between two things - and primarily so - as well as a relation holding between a name and a thing¹²). But if the first statement asserts that green is predicated in a particular banana and the second statement asserts that yellow is predicated in a particular banana, then the speaker could be talking about the same particular banana in the two statements, for example, when a particular banana has turned from green to yellow. To clarify this discussion, let us place our talk about the ripening banana in the context of Aristotle's theory of predication and reality. A particular banana is a primary substance, or something that cannot be predicated of or in anything else but of or in which many other things can be predicated. Among the things that can be predicated of this banana are a banana (the species) and a plant (the genus). These two things are secondary substances, and if one can no longer predicate them of this banana, then this banana is no longer what it is or the same thing. Among the things that

can be predicated in this banana are green (at one time) and yellow (at another time). This banana remains what it is no matter which thing is predicated in it. For Aristotle, the "said in" predication allows a particular thing to admit contrary qualities across time and yet retain its own integrity.

By distinguishing the "said in" predication from the "said of" predication, Aristotle has shown that particular things maintain an integrity of their own even when their attributes change. Particular things are thus the sort of thing that can be named, although they are also the sort of thing that can be perceived. The subject term of our statements about something perceived can therefore be the name of a thing, even though this thing is a particular thing perceived. What of the predicate term, however, which for Plato must name a Form and so does not name something perceived, but intellected? For Aristotle, the predicate term of our statement about something perceived does not name a Form, or even a quality, but rather an individual in a quality.¹³ The predicate term of the statement, "this banana is green", names this individual green, and therefore, like the subject term, names a particular thing perceived.

IV.

The Aristotelian solution of Plato's problem of the relations between language, reality, and perception involves a theory of predication that permits particular things perceived to be named by the subject and predicate terms of statements. Aristotle's theory of predication retains a Platonic element that is unwarranted for Berkeley, however. As we have seen, in order

for a perceived thing to be named by the subject term of a statement, the thing must in some sense "stand still" or have an identity of its own. For Aristotle, a particular thing can have this character only if it is regarded as a primary substance. But if there is such a thing as a primary substance, then there must be other things - its species and its genus - that are predicable of it. That is, to take our example, no particular banana could exist as a namable entity unless the species banana and the genus plant also existed as secondary substances. In other words, though this is not at first obvious, the relation between a primary substance and the secondary substances predicated of it seems suspiciously like the relation of dependence between a particular and the Forms in which it participates. It seems that for the Aristotelian solution no less than for the Platonic solution to Plato's problem, a particular thing can be named only in so far as there is some general thing "after which" it can be named. A discussion of how Berkeley thinks that this claim rests on a prejudice about the relation between language and perception and of his alternative to this view will take up the balance of this paper.

In A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, Berkeley calls attention to two Aristotelian prejudices that afflict the thinking of "the Schoolmen" on the relation between language and reality. The first prejudice is pointed out as follows:

'Tis thought that every name hath, or ought to have, only one precise and settled signification, which inclines men to think there are certain abstract,

determinate ideas, which constitute the true and only immediate signification of each general name. And that it is by the mediation of these abstract ideas, that a general name comes to signify any particular thing. Whereas, in truth, there is no such thing as one precise and definite signification annexed to any general name, they all signifying indifferently a great number of particular ideas.¹⁴

To translate from the terminology of Berkeley's idealism into Aristotelian terminology: a particular thing is not named as it is because it is "named after" the species or secondary substance predicated of it and picking out the essential feature or set of features in virtue of which the thing is a primary substance. For as we shall see, there is no one feature or set of features that essentially characterizes any particular thing, but a particular thing is rather a function of whichever features we take it essentially to have for our purposes. Thus, the word that names a particular thing in fact refers to any or all of the features that we happen to take to be essential to it.

The second prejudice plaguing the Aristotelian conception of the relation between language and reality is described by means of another example:

For instance, in this proposition, a die is hard, extended, and square, they will have it that the word die denotes a subject or substance, distinct from the hardness, extension and figure, which are predicated of it, and in which they exist. . . . to say that a die is hard, extended, and square, is not to attribute those qualities to a subject distinct from and supporting them, but only an explication of the meaning of the word die.¹⁵

Put in Aristotelian terms, a statement does not assert that the things named by the predicate terms are predicated in the thing named by the subject term, because there is no particular thing, having an identity of its own and named by the subject term, in which anything else can be predicated. Before I discuss the way in which Berkeley shows that these prejudices about the relation between language and reality arise from the relation between language and perception, I want to sum up his views on the Aristotelian theory of predication. The following three points capture the force of Berkeley's critique of this theory:

1. There is no secondary substance, predicable of a primary substance, that defines or picks out the essential feature or set of features in virtue of which the primary substance is primary.

2. Thus, there is no definite and distinct primary substance in which other things, such as qualities, can be predicated.

3. Statements about perceived things nevertheless assert a "said of" relation between the qualities named by the predicate terms and something named by the subject term. This "something" remains indefinite for us until any quality is predicated of it, and since indefinitely many qualities may be predicated of it, the "something" named by the subject term never becomes absolutely definite.

Now that we know which prejudices beset the Aristotelian theory of the relation between language and reality, we can examine Berkeley's claim that the source of these prejudices lies in the relation between language and perception. Berkeley believes that the mistakes of the Aristotelian theory originate

from prejudices operative in ordinary speech about the perceived world. This is not to say that these prejudices are not excused, or are not rather justified as adequate and even essential for the conduct of everyday practical affairs. However, an important function of philosophy is to deliver us from the "snares of popular language" and to lay bare the "truth of things."¹⁶ An example of the way in which ordinary language can mislead even philosophers about the true nature of things is the following:

Sitting in my study I hear a coach drive along the street; I look through the casement and see it; I walk out and enter into it; thus, common speech would incline one to think I heard, saw, and touched the same thing, to wit, the coach. It is nevertheless certain, the ideas introduced by each sense are widely different and distinct from each other; but having been observed constantly to go together, they are spoken of as one and the same thing.¹⁷

We say that we perceive - see, hear, or touch - a coach, but there is no one thing "just itself" that we in fact perceive.

We in fact perceive many different things - sensible qualities - that happen to be observed to be constantly present together.³

Berkeley makes the same point about the relation between language and perception in another example:

And as several of these [sensible qualities] are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one thing. Thus, for example, a certain color, taste, smell, figure, and consistence having been observed to go together, are accounted one distinct thing, signified by the name apple.¹⁸

As Philonous says, taking a word to name or refer to a range of things found constantly to occur together in experience is a matter of convenience only, in philosophy as in ordinary life:

Strictly speaking, Hylas, we do not see the same object that we feel; neither is the same object perceived by the microscope, which was by the naked eye. But in case every variation was thought sufficient to constitute a new kind or individual, the endless number or confusion of names would render language impracticable. Therefore to avoid this as well as other inconveniencies . . . men combine together several ideas, apprehended by diverse senses, or by the same sense at different times, or in different circumstances, but observed to have some connection in Nature, either with respect to coexistence or succession; all of which they refer to one name, and consider as one thing.¹⁹

Our sense of the identity or unity of a thing across time makes possible our naming of the thing with a word. But this sense of identity or unity is in turn a function of the constant, law-like way in which many perceived qualities go together (family resemblances?). The thing's identity is therefore not anything real in itself, but is rather an "open concept" relative to our need to reckon with and speak about identifiable segments of a perceived world essentially in flux:

Number . . . is entirely a creature of the mind, considering either an idea by itself, or any combination of ideas to which it gives one name, and so makes it pass for an unit. According as the mind variously combines its ideas the unit varies . . . the unit constantly relates to the particular draughts

the mind makes of its ideas, to which it affixes names, and wherein it includes more or less its own ends and purposes . . . Every combination of ideas is considered as one thing by the mind, and in token thereof is marked by one name.²⁰

To put the main points of Berkeley's view on the relation between language and perception in terms of our statements about the ripening banana: the statement, "this banana is green," asserts that a sensible quality, green, belongs to a cluster of sensible qualities that have been experienced to go together in a regular way and that have been called, for our convenience, "this banana." The statement, "this banana is yellow," asserts that the sensible quality, yellow, has been found to have replaced the sensible quality, green, in the particular cluster of sensible qualities spoken about in our first statement, if we are speaking about the same particular banana in each case.

One might want to ask why Berkeley's theory is not simply a recast of Plato's, with respect to our two sample statements about the ripening banana. We have seen that for Plato, when a particular banana ceases to participate in the Form, green, and begins to participate in the Form, yellow, we are talking about an essentially different or new particular thing. It is this problem, of a particular that is never the same in and through its development, that motivates Aristotle to posit a secondary substance that serves to identify a persistent particular by being predicable of it, while its contrary qualities are only predicable in it. The theories of Plato and Aristotle thus involve two different ways of defining a particular thing.

For Plato, since every predication predicates a Form of a particular, or since every feature of a particular thing serves to define it, a particular thing is never "just itself" and therefore cannot be named. For Aristotle, since only some predications predicate things of a particular thing, only some feature or set of features serve to define it, so that a particular thing can persist independently of contrary qualities predicated in it across time. Berkeley repudiates Aristotle's conception of definition by means of the predication of secondary substances, by asserting, like Plato, that every predication predicates something of something, so that no one feature or set of features serves to define a particular thing. But while for Plato, this means that each feature or set of features that a particular thing is found to have at any given time serves to define it, for Berkeley, this means that the cluster of features that we experience can never define a thing absolutely.

To conclude, Berkeley's theory can be summed up as follows. A cluster of features that we have found to go together in a regular way can serve to define a particular thing "for us," so that we can name it for the purpose of talking about what we perceive. The cluster of features is definite, but only relative to our needs. "In itself," the cluster is also an "open concept," which allows new features to be admitted to our definition of the thing when they turn up and as it suits our needs, as long as they cohere with the other features already found in the cluster.

Notes

1. Bestor, Thomas Wheaton, "Plato on Language and Falsehood," The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy, IX, 3 (Fall, 1978), pp. 23-37.
2. Ibid., p. 29.
3. Plato, Theaetetus 146c-148d (Cornford trans.).
4. Ibid., 152d-e.
5. Ibid., 157b-c.
6. Plato, Republic 475d-480a (Bloom trans.).
7. Plato, Phaedo 73d-74e (Tradennick trans.).
8. Ibid., 77c-78d.
9. Ibid., 77c-78d.
10. Ibid., 103a.
11. Bestor, supra note 1, p. 25.
12. Ackrill, J.L. "Notes on the Categories," in Moravcsik, J.M.E., ed., Aristotle: A Collection of Critical Essays (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 105.
13. Aristotle, Categories 2 (Ackrill trans.); Ackrill, supra note 12, p. 103.
14. Berkeley, A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, 18, in Ayers, M.R., ed., Berkeley: Philosophical Works (Totowa: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980), p. 73.
15. Ibid., 49, p. 91.
16. Berkeley, The Theory of Vision Vindicated and Explained, 35, in Ayers, supra note 14, p. 40.
17. Berkeley, An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision, 46, in Ayers, supra note 14, p. 21.

18. Berkeley, Principles, 11, in Ayers, supra note 14, p. 77.
19. Berkeley, Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, in Ayers, supra note 14, p. 194.
20. Berkeley, New Theory, 109, in Ayers, supra note 14, p. 40.