

Natural Normativity and Choice

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In *Natural Goodness*, Philippa Foot highlights a distinction with its roots in the works of Aristotle and Aquinas. This distinction is between acting in accordance with a given end, and acting in accordance with that end because it is recognized as an end. Another way to put it would be the difference between seeing an end and seeing an end *as an end*. This second notion I will call conceptualizing an end. Foot wonders what it would mean for conceptualizing an end to belong to the mind. She rejects the notion that this power to see ends as ends could be exercised through mere introspection. There is nothing, she thinks, that we apprehend that would mark a particular concept as an end. There is no feature of the physical form of those ends which we conceptualize as ends that is visible only to the human eye (and presumably hidden from the eyes of the lower animals). So what is it about human beings, or about our minds, that allows us to conceptualize ends? This is a question of two parts, one that is broadly metaphysical and one that is broadly epistemological. The metaphysical prong concerns what it is that makes something an end. The epistemological prong concerns how it is that we come to “see” certain ends as ends.

Foot mainly addresses the epistemological prong. Here, she focuses on the use of language to plan, to inform others of our intentions and our future actions, and to debate, justify, and recommend our choices. “It makes sense to ask what someone *thought* about the pros and cons of a particular choice because we can ask him and be given an answer. And he himself can go through arguments that have as a conclusion ‘so this is what I shall do’.” (Foot, 2001, p.55) This is one of the ways in which human beings are different from other animals. Among them, the only way to find out what they are going to do is to observe them doing it. However, among human beings, language provides a way to get at the planning stage of action.

But then the obvious question is, what is it about language that gives us this ability? Following Jackendoff (1997) and Carruthers (2002), I would suggest that it is language that is a (and possibly the primary) way in which we are able to make conscious various sorts of mental contents. I am aware that the unqualified words ‘conscious’ and ‘consciousness’ probably carry with themselves some fairly grandiose notions. To clarify my position here, by ‘conscious’ I mean something fairly simple: namely, that which we are (actively) attending to. This is roughly Jackendoff’s notion of consciousness with respect to the present question of how language might aid our thinking.

It has been hypothesized that one of the functions (and benefits) of language is that it allows us to attend to the content of our thoughts, and furthermore that we use language to integrate information from our various mental faculties (e.g. visual and auditory perception, social cognition, spatial reasoning, and so forth). The first of these ideas comes largely from Jackendoff's Intermediate Level Theory of Consciousness. On this view, consciousness is viewed as a layer between core (nonconscious) reasoning faculties and peripheral input/output systems such as vision, hearing, speech production, and so forth. Human language resides in this ring layer between the core and periphery. The results of core processes can end up being represented linguistically, as can suitable encodings of inputs from periphery systems; it is precisely these contents that make up our conscious thought.

Carruthers approaches the question of the role of language in the human mind from a slightly different angle, although I believe that the two views are compatible. On Carruthers' view, language functions as the medium of communication between the various modules of the mind. One perhaps startling feature of this view is that this communication need not be conscious; it is hypothesized that it can be carried out by nonconscious logical forms. But what does it mean for a logical form (i.e., a semantic representation of a sentence) to be nonconscious? Surely a sentence is a paradigm example of something that is available to consciousness. And indeed it is, on Carruthers' view, provided it is attached to some sort of phonological content (what he terms "inner speech"). The pre-theoretic motivation for this idea is that when we think conscious thoughts, we most commonly report the experience as something akin to "hearing the words in our head." However, nothing in this view would preclude the existence of nonconscious sentences absent any phonological content. These are precisely the sort of things that Carruthers postulates are the medium of non-domain specific thought.

One way to connect these two ideas would be to say that it is precisely those sentences we hear "in our head" (i.e., that have phonological content attached to them, even if it is never articulated) that we are conscious of; that those sentences, and the logical forms behind them, are the contents of consciousness and a Jackendoffian intermediate or "ring" layer of the mind.

But what bearing, if any, do these thoughts about possible cognitive architectures have to do with metaethics? One area where we might look is how this sort of linguistically-enabled consciousness affects how we reason, as opposed to other, non-linguistic species. While it at first may sound odd to talk of non-human animals engaging in reason, but there is strong evidence that, especially among the higher primates, there is the ability to engage in fairly sophisticated reasoning. The best example of this is cases of redirected aggression among certain species of monkeys (Cheney and Seyfarth (1990), cited in Jackendoff (1997, p.185)). What occurs is that monkey X will attack monkey Y, and in retaliation, monkey Y will, at some later time, attack monkey Z, where monkey Z is a member of monkey X's kin group. As Jackendoff notes, the reasoning that monkey Y must engage in to arrive at

the conclusion to attack monkey Z requires some fairly sophisticated reasoning ability¹.

Human beings probably have a similar sort of nonconscious reasoning faculty. However, what is different in us is our ability to use language. On the models of the relation between language and consciousness sketched above, language would give us a sort of “hook” into our reasoning processes. That is, the steps that may be opaque to the monkey are transparent to us. When we are in situations similar to the redirected aggression case among the three monkeys, we can monitor and guide our reasoning in a way that the monkey cannot. Also, and I believe more importantly, once we have arrived at a conclusion (and no matter how much conscious control we have exercised over our reasoning), the fact that that conclusion can be expressed linguistically allows us to attend to, to focus on, and most importantly, to subject that conclusion to further analysis and reasoning.

This is one of the important feature that foot notes about human beings. We can, after all the (first-order) reasoning is done, ask ourselves (following the model of Foot’s skeptic), “What if I do not care about being a good human being?” (Foot, 2001, p.52) This is indeed a puzzling fact about human beings. We have the power of choice, and we can choose to be amoral or immoral. Again I will claim that it is language that allows us to do this. While our nonconscious reasoning abilities are shaped similarly to the monkey’s, in that the conclusions that they arrive at (modulo pathological individuals) are ones that would guide us towards ends that are in the interest of human good, our ability to make conscious this reasoning process, and to question and even subvert its results separate us from the rest of the animal kingdom. Morality matters to us precisely because we are endowed with the ability to choose to be immoral².

To conclude, I would like to touch (very briefly) on another issue in metaethics. That is the question of where the so-called “normative grip” of morality comes from. Moral statements seem to be able to move us to action in ways that mere descriptive statements cannot. I have suggested that it is our ability to conceptualize ends, and more importantly, our ability to reason linguistically, that provides us with the power of choice whether to behave in accordance with natural ends, or to violate them in pursuit of some other ends. But with this ability to choose comes some responsibility to choose well. And to do so, we may need, from time to time, express (as a moralizing statement) what one ought to do, since (given our conscious reasoning abilities) it is not guaranteed that we will choose to do what one ought. And here, I believe, we have the beginning of an account of why moral considerations can have such force over us.

¹In the sense that at least two of the key components in the reasoning process are non-perceptual. Namely, that Z is in X’s kin group and kin groups are a sort of “equivalence class” when it comes to acts of aggression or other social behaviors.

²And perhaps this is why we do not tend to evaluate other animals’ actions as moral or immoral. They do not have the sort of reflective choice that we do.

References

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